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A Novel by

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52

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TWO BIG SNOWLAND NOVELS

WOLF WAR . . . . . Moran Tudury 2

Heavy and ruthless was the hand that ruled the vast fur empire. Yet a lonely grave was its undoing—that, and fighting men from over the border.

STALKER OF THE HELL-PACK . . . . . Owen Finbar 93

The long vengeance trail was swallowed by the Bering Sea. Only Jim Bentley, wise with feudist wrath, could have traced the hell-pack's chief.

TWO NORTHWEST NOVELETS

RED GOLD OF RISING DOG . . . . . William R. Cox 34

Yellow gold drew men of every stamp into the frozen hills. But the gold of Rising Dog was red—bright as the coat of lean, patient Constable Nelson.

WHITEWATER AMBUSH . . . . . Evan Slyter 56

Trouble roared along the river, drowning the thunder of the rapids. And to the heart of it, like a moth to a flame, gravitated Ananias Jones.

FOUR NORTHERN SHORT STORIES

THE BLIZZARD WAIF . . . . . Dan O'Rourke 29

One homicide, two confessions . . . it didn't add up, to Sergeant McBayne.

HIDDEN HERITAGE . . . . . John Starr 48

The lake country knew little and cared less about this man and his dog.

BOOTHILL JACKPOT . . . . . Eli Colter 76

Tonapah Lee held aces—but the murder man-trap hid a grisly joker.

LONE-WOLF LAW . . . . . H. M. S. Kemp 86

Man-Who-Travels-Alone lived up to his name—one jump ahead of the law.

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WOLF WAR

By MORAN TUDURY

For three centuries the Company had held sway. Then from the shadow of its throne rose the flame of revolt.

A great blast shattered the stockade. The magazine had exploded!

A Novelet of a Fur Dynasty

HUDSON HOUSE, Arctic Fur Company headquarters, made Keith Barry uneasy tonight. Compared to its trappers' cabins, the company's great cedar-beamed hall was like a millionaire's shooting lodge. Frozen men, on lonely traplines, were risking death to pay for this luxury. No wonder that already from the wilderness came mutterings of rebellion—wolf war.

Standing there before the huge, flaming hearth, Keith stirred. At twenty-four,

he had hunted for years in Rupert's Land. His great body had been toughened, tried by it. He knew its people. And now his dark, alert face was set in a scowl.

Worst was the news brought by Metis runners from New America. The small settlement of American and Canuck free fur traders was in desperate straits. Its fisheries and crops had failed, and women and children were there. Because his mother had been born, buried there—because its leader, Pat Conlon, at Rupert's Rapids had once saved him from drowning—Keith clung to one fervent hope. That his Scotch father would not take this winter to do what he had long threatened—outlaw the free traders at New America. That he would continue to buy their season's peltries. Without such help, the settlement was doomed.

Suddenly, he stiffened. . . .

Somewhere outside had sounded an uproar—hoarse voices raised in anger. Came violent sounds of scuffling, a single blasphemous cry. There were shouts of "Get him! Hit him!" Then a thudding jolt . . . silence. It was like his own fears sprung to life.

Someone was coming toward him rapidly. It was Raven, his hunting guide since boyhood. The old Metis' face was tense, and Keith saw concern in his smoldering eyes.

"Come, Sache—bad trouble."

He followed the Metis breed through headquarters kitchen and outside. A light snow was falling, the wind knife-sharp through the firs. Huddled men showed starkly against its whiteness. At his approach, they fell back, respectfully. A man lay on the snow. Keith looked down into a face bloodied, hurt—then started. The man was old Pat Conlon. The whole scene was like a nightmare come true.

"Reckon I ain't so welcome here, Keith," he said.

"We figured he was lookin' for trouble, boss," a hand explained. "Said he'd see you—or hurt somebody. He's got a knife stuck in that boot there."

Keith slid his arms under Conlon's shoulders. "Raven, take his feet." Anger was shaking him now.

They got the man from New America into the kitchen. With his bloody face washed, court-plastered, the old trapper revived. Now whiskey warmed his insides. He bit off a plug of tobacco—spat, to the cook's speechless horror, against his spotless stove. His eyes were on Keith.

"I had to come. There wasn't nowheres else to come, Keith. I left women and kids back there, prayin' for me. With all them folks dependin' on you, I reckon anybody'd raised hell. These buckos said I couldn't see you." His cheeks were sunken, harsh lines etched in the pinched, colorless face.

Keith frowned. "You fellows took plenty of skins, Pat. Didn't you get your money?" A thought was coming to him and he dreaded it.

Conlon's glance met his, bitter. "The skins was fine." He nodded. "All prime. We got blue-fox a-plenty, choice sable and beaver. We figured, come this time, all of us'd be eatin' cow meat. But we *ain't*. We're starvin'. That's God's truth, boy."

Keith's dark face was worried. "Didn't the company—"

"The Arctic Company didn't buy a pelt." Conlon's eyes flashed. "They put us off all summer. They never come for the skins. And they never told us to bring 'em in. We wasn't worried—not at first. Hell, for fourteen years this company has took our skins!"

Fingers of ice gripped Keith's heart.

The antagonism of the company, and his father, for New America, was well known. Legally, unable to bar the settlement, the company had found this other way. A heartless method, stirring Keith to the core.

Here was the man who had saved his life, bloodied and beaten by Hudson House hands. His mother, American to the heart, had come from that little Northwest settlement. Her grave was back there now, with her own people. Mary Keith's last request had irked his Scotch, company-proud father, dearly though the Laird loved her. He felt old Conlon's eyes on him again.

"I'll see the Laird at once." He stood up. "He can't understand what's really happening." But he knew a fight was on his hands.

"There's another angle." Conlon's misery, momentarily, seemed tinged with uneasiness. "Somehow, Moloch's got word of our trouble. He knows we still got

them skins. I don't have to tell you. Him and his bunch would do murder to grab them furs."

For five years Moloch and his band had constituted a greater menace to Rupert's Land than any timber-wolf marauders. Not even the Mounties had been able to stem their red tide of plundering on the premises of the company, itself, as well as New America. Willingly, for that small fortune in furs, Moloch's guerillas would wipe out a defenseless settlement. And for Keith this danger was an added spur.

AS he crossed the hall, Lenore Beverly halted him. His fiancee's lovely face was flushed, agitated. "Keith, I've waited hours. Don't tell me you're mixed up with those trapper feuds again! Can't you—"

"Not now, Lenore," he interrupted. "I've got to find the Laird." Somehow the sound of her petulant voice made him resentful now.

"Go ahead," he said, and went on.

His way led through the bar. Its sole occupant, a young man in expensive and ornate hunting outfit, regarded him owlishly. It was Lenore's brother, Bert. Sober, Bert was all right. Fortified by liquor, as now—something else. He had moved squarely in Keith's path.

"Wait a minute," he said thickly. "Have little dring."

"Later, Bert." His scowl should have been a warning.

Bert seized his arm. "C'mon. You'n me—jus' one little dring, ol' man." His grip tightened uncomfortably. "What's this I hear. . . . You'n ol' Conlon out in the kitchen, hey?" Without releasing Keith, he waggled a foolish, reproving finger. "They tell me Conlon's got beau-' ful daughter. Shame on Keith. Gonna marry Lenore, but playing around Conlon's girl."

Keith's attempt to free himself now became a scuffle. Bert was panting, "Wait minute! Watcha doin'?" and suddenly they were wrestling.

Suddenly released, Bert staggered across the floor, smashed into a post—struck his head. Keith watched him lying there. Then a door swung open and Raven entered. Keith looked up, flushed, angry.

"I heard fight, Sache," the breed said. "I help M'sieu Beverly now. You go see Laird."

Keith hesitated. The sound of Bert's striking head had startled him. He wished the bartender had been here to see what actually had occurred. But something more urgent than a drunk's sore head demanded attention now. He hurried up a flight of stairs to a closed door. At his knock, a deep voice answered—after three generations of Barrys in America, still burred.

Keith entered to face the Laird. Here was one person in Hudson House who had to have a heart. If he didn't—only one way was left.

PROUD, fierce—the Laird's was strictly a company face. As a boy, Keith had recognized its resemblance to those portraits hanging on Hudson House's walls. It was of the breed that had come from the Seventeenth Century Orkneys and Scottish highlands, by sailing ship through the floes of Hudson Strait—with gunpowder and ax to found a subarctic empire. The Laird was not soft but tough as northland spruce.

Keith understood him too well to quibble. "Conlon's here about his furs. He says that the company held him off all summer. Now he can't get them to Edmonton."

The twinkle faded from the keen blue eyes.

"Their crops and fisheries have failed," Keith said quickly. "Unless we take their furs, send supplies—well, it means a tough winter for them. The weather's closing in fast. Another thing. Pat says Moloch's men may jump their fur cache. We've got to act right away."

Still no answer, only those frosty eyes upon him.

"I told him there must be some mistake," Keith said.

"Aye, I understand," came the blunt tones. "This company will buy no more skins from those squatters. They've scourged the country too long. They're bad as Moloch and his outlaws. Their farms will ruin the wilderness. They'll drive the beaver clear to the Arctic Ocean."

Keith broke in, "This isn't business.

It's women and children. They'll starve—"

"It's business all the same." The Laird's jaw thrust forward, his eyes hard glints. "Why should I help them to ruin this company? Let those people suffer. Let them see there's no place for them here. Aye, we've put 'em off all summer. And now they'll have to leave, go back to the States where they belong. Can you not see? This way we'll be rid of them—without a shot fired, a man hurt. It's best, laddie."

Silence fell over the bright office—silence so heavy it seemed to fill Keith's ears. He knew his face was flushed but endeavored to keep his voice steady.

"There's room here for us—and them, too."

The answer was sharp as a shot. "There is not."

Keith said warmly, "This country's big. It's immense. It needs settlers. Americans are the best settlers in the world. They're not like Moloch and his guerillas. Look at me. I'm half American, myself." That stung, and he saw the Laird pale, went on, "Was my mother good stock? She was American. Didn't she want her very grave in New America?"

"Na, laddie," the Laird's voice was pleading, his eyes dropping to the photograph on his desk. "Don't speak of your mother so. Your mother was too good for them. She—"

"If my mother were alive, you'd never have done this. Starved out her own people."

Almost, he regretted it. The Laird's hand trembled on the desk-top; his eyes half-closed. Then he spoke harshly.

"It is my duty to the Company," he said. "I'll do my duty."

Keith said with equal harshness, "And my duty's to remember my mother is buried there. With people as much mine as you are. And that Pat Conlon saved my life." He laughed shortly. "And I know what to do about it."

The old man stared.

"I'm leaving here tonight," Keith said. "I'll take them medicine and supplies. Before it's too late."

The Laird's face was apoplectic. "I forbid it!"

Keith met his glare, unwavering, and the old man's voice softened. "Keith, you can na do it, laddie. It's for you, I'm saving the Company. Think of it that way. I control the stock. One day it will be yours—Keith Barry, Emperor of the Northwest!"

Keith knew what his father was thinking. . . . Of those men from the Old World who had made a fur empire in the New. Of forts hewn from the frozen wilderness, a royal charter, Governors who traveled in express canoes with a flag at the stern and singing, red-shirted Iroquois paddlers, a cannon firing the salutes; of Charter Night when the rum and champagne flowed free and elderly men—"the Wintering Partners"—sat on the floor at Hudson House, simulating the paddling of a giant canoe, roaring the songs of the voyageurs. . . . The spell broke.

"I'm going," he said.

They faced each other, curiously alike in the heavy jaws, shoulders—steady, challenging eyes. Now each knew neither would break, nor where this conflict would end.

A KNOCK sounded at the door. Uninvited, it swung open. Outside, men filled the hall. Lenore's father, Colonel Beverly, strode in, spoke to the Laird. He seemed pale, shaken.

"Donald, there is trouble — grave trouble. Keith here . . . has injured Bert."

The Laird's eyes were heavy, puzzled.

"They fought in the bar," Colonel Beverly said. "Keith has injured Bert badly. He struck his head. He has been unconscious for twenty minutes and the surgeon is alarmed. It was an ill thing to do."

The Laird swung on the speaker, his sole instinct springing alive. "If Keith struck him, it was for a cause." He glared at the colonel.

Another man walked into the office, the local constable.

"I've got to make an arrest, Mr. Barry," he said to the Laird. "It's necessary, under the circumstances."

Keith saw the Laird's angry flush. He understood . . . now his father's only thought was to spring to his defense. Then, the Laird's eyes oddly flickered. He seemed to be thinking.

"Well, now," he hesitated, "we will do everything right and proper. If you must —hold the lad."

Keith saw the gleam of triumph in his eyes, understood. Arrest would prevent Keith's trip to New America. A day or two and the country would be impassable for canoes, all water routes frozen. If Keith did not leave tonight, his chance for the winter was gone.

The Laird was speaking, "Leave the lad here till we return. Aye, Constable, lock the door if you will. I want a word with you. We'll have a look at Bert, then come back." His expression was a strange mixture of affection and victory as he looked at Keith. "Rest easy, laddie. We'll see this through together."

Keith stood in the empty, locked study, stunned. Without his aid, the settlers were doomed. The realization minimized his own troubles. He cursed the fate that had thrown Lenore's drunken brother across his path. He cursed Hudson House, built on dead men's bones.

Behind him, a window raised gently. Raven stood there—as if in mid-air. Raven, the ally who never failed . . . the incomparable.

"Come quickly, Sache. M'sieu Beverly very bad. Better you leave now."

In his heart Keith knew the truth. He was not afraid to face the consequences of that hellish accident. But New America needed him. And the debt must be paid. He went over the windowsill, followed Raven down the ladder to the packed snow below.

The Law would have to wait.

II

HIS paddle dipped into the roily, blue-black water, left wrist turning it with a stroke effortless, clean. Past willow-bank, spruce, hour after hour the canoe had slipped on. Falling temperature, clouds spread into drear anvil shapes in the cold sky, told Keith the truth. It would be a race to New America. The freeze-up had begun.

His stocking of the canoe had been hurried, the supplies desperately meager: pemmican, tea, coffee, several sides of bacon, a sack of flour, canned milk, demijohn of whiskey—enough to last New America not more than two days. Yet even this weighted down the canoe.

Raven raised a dripping paddle. "Much cold soon, Sache. See—the snow goose fly low."

Bitter dusk fell as they pulled into a clump of birches. Against a down-tree, Raven laid a lean-to, covering it with a tarpaulin. Keith made the fire. To conserve space, he had brought no oil stove. Firewood was wet and must be split, dry pith dug out for tinder. The fire smoked soddenly. A fine, thin snow was beginning. Bleak was this scene as his own thoughts.

New America's fur cache, he was thinking, would prove an irresistible temptation to Moloch—that ruthless and predatory wilderness denizen who, like the old Scottish outlaws, preyed impartially upon every man. In generations past, Scotland had sent black blood to the New World as well as heroes, Guerilla Moloch was proof of it.

Keith started. His eardrums shook with a wild, insane squealing. He looked at Raven. The Metis was watching the bend of the river.

Out of the thin snowflakes stole a birch-bark canoe. Kneeling in the stern, in white furs, was an enormous figure. Young, dark-faced, this man paddled with the sureness of a Canuck. Ahead, sat an aged, red-nosed Scot in torn and dirty kilts. Cheeks puffed to bursting, he was blowing into a bagpipe, making the woods hideous with uproar—pausing only to drink from a flask.

The canoe pulled alongside his own. The young giant staggered ashore, followed by the bow-legged Scot. In the thickening snow-swirls, they were like wilderness wraiths. And it was hard to tell which was drunker. The giant hailed him.

"I be Roderick, Lord of the Woods! And yon's my piper, Dugald!"

He laughed loudly, and again the frozen trees shivered with the pipes' mad squealing.

Keith made place for them by the fire. They gulped the coffee, devouring the pork and biscuit. He regarded them wonderingly. Yet experience had taught him something. Strange were the brethren of the Northwest wilds—descendants of that

even stranger Old World company that had come to Canada long ago.

The giant began to talk, and now Keith noted his reckless manner, almost too bright eyes. Memory stirred. . . . He had heard of this self-styled 'lord of the woods.' Mad or not, the man's eccentricities regaled many a lonely Company outpost. Without urging, he told his story, almost parrot-fashion. He snatched the flask from the unwary piper, almost drained it—then gestured in a sweeping motion that encompassed half the skyline.

"It's all mine!" he told Keith fiercely. "You won't find it in the stinkin' record books. But it's mine! *By right of inheritance!*

The piper, cunning as a weasel, had retrieved the flask. Nodding his thistle-cap at his master, he whispered to Keith, "Aye, yon's a daft and glorious mon. He's the de'il himself." He laid a finger on his lips. "Whisht, while he tells ye his tale."

Now the story was coming back to Keith. The man who sat before him actually was, so woodsmen said, a descendant of the first Company that had sailed into Hudson's Bay. As the story went, Roderick regarded himself as one defrauded of his natural rights.

Keith checked a smile. Claimants to Company tracts were a common nuisance. A whole brigade of lawyers was regularly employed in fighting off their suits, just or otherwise. Roderick of the Woods was but one of this vast outcast army—and, Keith was discovering, perhaps the most bitter.

"To hell with them all," he said. "And who might ye be?"

Keith told him.

"I know ye!" The eyes grew dark and dour under the bushy brows. "Son of the black Barry who has stolen my all." Roderick's bitter eyes roved over the canoe and equipment. "Ye've got all—and me, *nothin'*. You're the prince and I'm the illegitimate prince!"

WHEN Keith admitted that he was taking supplies to New America, he laughed loudly. He roared until he fell back on the snow, convulsed. Then he regarded Keith almost with approval.

"So ye've quit the throne? To help your father's bitterest enemies. Ye'll never win," he said with conviction. "The dangers are too many. *"This—"* he indicated the wind sweeping from the north —"will beat the Americans. Moloch and his huskies will beat 'em. Why, Moloch's robbed their fisheries already. His wolverines have blasted their traps. No, ye'll never beat the Company—damn it to hell."

He leaned across the fire, his eyes intent.

"Nobody can beat the Company," he said angrily. "I've tried it and me father and me grandfather—him called Red Roddie. For a hundred years we've tried to beat the Company—and failed. They're too strong. Man, they're fierce. Look at me—a timber whelp, eatin' hand to mouth. I'm *proof* ye can't beat them. They've made three generations of outcasts of us. Nobody could have tried harder. Red Roddie burned their stockades with the Iroquois. With his own hands, me father killed their chief factor at Buffalo House. I've raided their silver-fox ranches. But they've beat us," then he said softly, eyes gleaming, "maybe."

He stiffened. "There's a rich cache at New America. It's hidden away. Moloch and his wolves are after it." The bright eyes blinked. "Maybe ye're after it, too?"

Keith's temper slipped, "That's a lie." Then the thought came to him. "More likely you. You need it more."

The other showed his teeth, shrugging. "If I get a chance." Suddenly he frowned; his voice was heavy. "Or maybe ye're after Conlon's girl. It's that!" and he half rose. Keith noted the hand that dropped to the knife at his belt. "Keep off, Barry," he said hoarsely. "I'm on my way to her now. And by God one day I'll have her."

He watched Keith from burning eyes.

Dugald, the piper, said, "Hoot, gi' me to drink, mon."

Later, from his sleeping bag, Keith watched them. Dugald compelling Raven to try on his thistle-cap; Roderick somewhere finding another flask. The pipes, suddenly growling and wailing again. His eyes shut upon a scene wholly mad.

WITH the stinging wind in their faces, they shoved off at dawn. Now Keith's paddle crackled the water's

first thin ice scales; sleet peppered his skin, making it rough, raw. Exertion drove panting breath from his nostrils in clouds. On either side of the fast-freezing stream the woodland rose weirdly, shadowy — blue-gray and dreamlike through the thickening flurries. Now the wind blew from the barrens, keening its witch's whistle through the white-capped firs. Once, ghost-like, a huge Wapiti elk lumbered to the water's edge, saw them and vanished into the whiteness like an apparition.

Worse even than the cold's torture was the complete realization of his fool's errand. He had flouted birthright, sweetheart and law, plunging into this northland hell—for what? The relief he was bringing with him would not last three days.

A lunatical shout from the canoe behind roused him. It was Roderick, mad lord of the woods—and Keith understood the reason for his derision.

Above them, like some proud citadel, rose the dim outline of Buffalo House. Oldest of the Company's stations, and yet in use, its ancient stockades still stood. Though long unused for such purpose, it would have made an impregnable fort. Keith had visited it often. Behind its staunch walls was the orderly layout of well-filled warehouses, living quarters, armory, carpentry and blacksmithy. In the Eighteenth Century, it must have been a magnificent sight when the canoe brigades came in with the winter's skins —when outside on the slopes a hundred trappers' and voyageurs' campfires burned.

Keith's head turned to the wilderness below . . . where he knew now lay New America. New America, desperate, impoverished. From the Buffalo House's ample supplies, the little settlement easily could be carried through the winter. He frowned at the absurdity of such a hope. But it was the only chance. And his mind clung to it, refused to admit failure yet. Somehow, he might still make a deal with those furs.

They flashed past the Company post and now saw the thin, winnowed smoke of the American settlement. They were seen and tiny figures were running down to the banks. Twenty minutes later, Keith was clambering from the canoe. And the first man to greet him was Pat Conlon.

He grunted in surprise. In the abruptness of his departure, there had been no opportunity to think of Conlon. Vaguely, he had pictured the free trader still behind in headquarters kitchen.

The old man almost appeared to enjoy his astonishment. His peaked face crinkled.

"Hell, I come across country—just like I went," he said. "Snowshoes. I got one foot in the grave but I can still make them Indian rackets travel." His frosty eyes fell on Keith's canoe load. One hand touched Keith's shoulder in silent expression of gratitude. But even that gratefulness was fleeting.

Pat Conlon knew, as well as himself, how wholly inadequate was the supply.

He led Keith down the settlement's single, cleared pathway, through a rapidly swelling crowd: still, pinched faces, stiff-limbed figures, staring eyes in which was only dull interest. Men tramped sullenly in their wake; thin-faced women with a baby in arms or an awed child clinging at skirts. Keith realized that they, too, had appraised his meager hoard. Few, he noted—and although all knew him—called him by name.

Conlon took him into what passed for the settlement meeting house—a rough log cabin, windowless and cheerless save for the fire in the clay-plastered hearth. While Keith got off his furs, Conlon stood waiting. Keith's mind was made up. The more he thought of it, he was convinced. Wade, the Buffalo House factor, must be won over. The man had known him for years, since his boyhood. He was strict but humane. When he realized that human lives hung in the balance here. . . .

A boy slipped past Keith, stirred the fire. The flames, leaping up, showed the face—thin, intent, yet somehow beautiful in its appreciation of the simple comfort of a fire. Keith's eyes ran over the slim figure in corduroy pants and mackinaw, features delicate beneath short and curly brown hair.

Then he faced Conlon. The silent watchers had streamed in through the door—perhaps thirty in all. They hunched there, awkward, ill-at-ease, watching like numb-witted animals at a slaughterhouse.

"Our only chance is Buffalo House," Keith said. "We couldn't get help from headquarters now—even if they'd give it. Nobody'll get canoes over the river. Not this winter."

THERE was no answer. No figure moved in the still room lit by the flames. Conlon was watching him silently. The boy by the fire squatted on his heels looking up gravely. Finally, Pat Conlon walked to the fire, spat in it. His face was in shadow now. His voice itself seemed shadowy. Keith knew that he listened to a beaten man.

"Not Buffalo House," Conlon said. "I been there this mornin'. I been there on my knees. For food, medicine and—" he halted—"for somethin' else. For help." He laughed shortly, and when he spoke his words hit Keith with the impact of sodden bullets. "Moloch's comin' for our furs. We had a warnin' from the Crees. We was good to the Crees when times was good. Now they come an' warned us. Moloch's comin' with them wolves o' hisn. He must be down by the bend now—not three miles away."

Keith stared.

"That's why I went to Buffalo House," Pat said. "I reminded Wade how Moloch was wanted for murder. What he would try an' pull off here." He laughed mirthlessly. "Know what Wade told me? He said he had his orders. We wouldn't get nothin'—not a damn thing. An' Wade said somethin' else. That this is what the Company wants—to have dog eat dog, an' us an' Moloch gobble each other up. Then, he says, they'll finally be shut of the lot of us."

Keith's lips compressed. Anger was swelling the veins in his forehead. Conlon turned to the boy at the fire and spoke.

"Throw on some more wood, Peg."

The "boy" rose.

Keith started. So this was the reason for that beauty of face, the ill-clad figure's grace. It was no boy but Conlon's daughter. The beautiful one Bert Beverly had talked about. The girl Roderick had come to see. His eyes turned to the door. Roderick had just come in and was standing there looking at Peg Conlon. It was hard to believe that anyone as fresh and lovely as this slim, clear-eyed girl could be the personal property of a drunken outcast. He roused himself.

"So that's the layout," Conlon was saying. "Moloch's comin' now. And we can't get no help. So now what? I'm for givin' them the furs. They ain't no good to us no-how. It'll save us bloodshed."

The words bit through Keith's set lips. "No—now we'll fight," he said. "Those furs are the only thing we've got. We'll fight for them to a finish."

But the words sounded hollow even to his own ears—did not create a ripple amongst those who had crowded into the silent, misery-oppressed room.

While the supplies were being brought inside for apportioning, Keith made a disagreeable discovery. The New Americans were suspicious of him. Even Conlon's lieutenant, bearded, pot-bellied Jos Petrie, obviously shared that suspicion. He had known Keith for years—had even known Keith's mother. Yet the Canuck's eyes were averted when Keith greeted him.

Petrie turned, saw Pat Conlon leaving the room. Then, suddenly, his low voice bit at Keith.

"You make fine speech," he said scornfully. "You very clever man. You bring only leetle food for only few days. Ver' smart, eh? Mebbe you want cache for you'self, eh? Mebbe you want us take food an' go away to Edmonton—an' leave cache for you, eh? You theenk Joe Petrie one big dam' fool, no? You theenk he don't know notheeng. Bah!" He spat, his dark eyes gleaming with anger. "Mebbe you got scheme for you' father, eh? Or mebbe weeth thees no-good Rod'rick? But you ain' so smart. Joe Petrie watch you like cat. You don't get chance for to do nothing now."

Keith flushed, fists clenching. Then he saw Peg Conlon looking at him—some odd entreaty in her eyes. He managed to control himself. From a Canuck, perhaps anything was to be expected. And other, more pressing matters now demanded attention.

NEW America was ill equipped for defense. The sole spot suitable for

standing off an armed enemy was the meeting house. Below the floor, in its rough cellar, were the bales of the fur cache. Keith stirred Conlon into putting men to work, boring firing-ports in the log walls and bringing in pails of water. While this was being done, he divided the food. A can of milk and one of pemmican, a few thin rashers of bacon, a handful of flour and half cup of tea or coffee—it would not sustain even one person long. Conlon's daughter assisted him.

She was at his side, holding the medicine kit, when he inspected the ailing. One woman had a fever, and they made a pallet for her in an isolated corner. Peg Conlon mixed hot water and salt for gargling for a child with an infected throat. Old Mama Gravois, enfeebled and ninety if a day, was given sips of whiskey and hot water from the demijohn.

Mama Gravois had also known his mother, and she pressed his hand.

"Ya was a fool to come, Keith," she said. "But Gawd knows, boy, we need ya somethin' terrible. Gimme some more o' that fightin' medicine. It goes down fine."

To Keith, who demanded an unending succession of hot water, clean rags, Conlon's daughter was proving a source of wonder. She was always beside him, unfailingly supplied with needed articles. Every task she performed quickly, efficiently. In her arms each crying baby was stilled, comforted.

As they reached the end of the sick-list, he studied her, curiously. She was dark-Irish—brown-black hair, olive skin, eyes so blue-gray as to startle him. She could have no more than reached to his shoulder. Even in her man's attire, he sensed the figure beneath, slim but vigorous.

She felt his glance, lifted her amazingly long lashes. She did not smile, simply returned his gaze. The depth of those crystal-clear eyes affected Keith strangely. It was as if he were looking into a translucent forest pool.

He smiled. "I remember you now. You used to make dolls out of pine-cones. Not so long ago, either."

"I don't make dolls any more," she said gravely and, he was amused to see, with a touch of dignity. "I'm eighteen. Last spring I graduated from St. Mary's Convent—at Edmonton."

Keith said, "Eighteen is certain pretty old."

"It's too old to play with dolls," she said and for the first time he realized that her remarkable eyes were also amused. And it came to Keith. No matter how outwardly innocent, unspoiled, this girl had a perfectly just realization of her own attractiveness. She was fully aware of the impression she was making on him now.

He said, "The girl I'm going to marry is twenty-three," and wondered why he had said it—particularly, now, when it seemed like something in a remote world.

"I know," she answered, "Lenore Beverly," and added, "I remember you, too. You used to come here and make canoes out of birch bark. You were always making boats or traps or something."

He laughed at the quickness of that. "Well," he agreed, "it looks like I'm still not grown up—like you are." He thought of the illogic of his trip here. "Perhaps I'm still playing. I'm being Lord Bountiful."

Quick as a flash, she replied, "You're not playing at being anything. You're helping. Nobody could help us like you're doing."

Keith felt his cheeks flush like a boy's, said, "They don't think so. They think I'm up to no good."

Now he saw something else in her eyes —conviction. "They don't really believe that. They're hungry and frightened. They'll find out about you soon."

Keith grinned wryly. "I suppose when Moloch gets here."

She was looking straight at him. "Then, or some other time. *Any* time," she added. "You'll show them."

And the frankness of her approval astonished him. Girls, he knew, weren't given to parting with compliments so readily and on such short notice. This girl, he was shrewd enough to see, perhaps less apt than others. Yet she had baldly, straight-from-the-shoulder, expressed confidence in him. He couldn't help think of Lenore. Lenore's method was somewhat different—to keep you out on a limb, constantly.

"Thank you," he smiled. "Those are kind words."

She scarcely smiled. "Don't thank me," was all she said. Her head turned, and Keith saw her looking at the door. It seemed to him that suddenly her olive skin paled.

Then he saw Roderick leaning in the doorway. He was watching them. His expression was unmistakable: raging, flaming jealousy—so overwhelming that even from here Keith saw the shaking of his giant's body. Keith met the girl's glance.

"Your sweetheart doesn't like us talking together."

Her answer was low, unexpected, "He's not my sweetheart—as you call it. I feel sorry for him. But sometimes he makes me—" Keith didn't catch the rest but would have sworn that it was "afraid."

He was gone from the doorway, when Keith left the cabin—but not gone far. As Keith rounded the cabin in search of Pat Conlon, he found himself facing Roderick, mad lord of the woods.

He blocked Keith's path, drawing the hunting-knife from his belt. His dark face was clotted with congealed blood.

"Damn ye!" he spat. "I warned ye, Barry," and came at Keith like a thunderbolt.

HE felt the knife's slash through the loose hang of his jacket-sleeve. At the same instant, his right fist struck. It was a short blow because Roderick was almost on top of him. It found its mark, smashing the giant's chin. Roderick grunted, stumbled backward in the ankle-deep snow, sat down. His head shook dazedly. Then he rose, the blade held like a sword. Crouched, teeth bared like an animal's, he crept toward Keith foot by foot. A curious whining sound escaped from his mouth.

The fact was coldly before Keith's eyes: This man was coming to kill him.

Suddenly, the giant sprang. Keith swung from his path—but the unexpected happened. He slipped in the snow and fell. Roderick's enormous bulk descended upon him. The left arm crushed him in a bear's embrace. With his face buried in that great chest, Keith's right hand found the knife-wrist, desperately clung to it. But only for a second did he halt its movement. With power greater than its own, it began to turn in on him. He felt the point, like hot steel, lick his wrist. In came the terrible knife.

Abruptly, Keith released the knife-wrist and blindly shoved his clawed fingers against Roderick's face. With a final explosiveness of strength, he heaved. The giant's knee slid in the snow—he fell on his face. Keith leaped up.

Cursing, Roderick reared upward. Now he came at Keith wildly, insane with fury. It was the one break Keith had wanted.

His legs were braced firmly now. He did not slip. As Roderick charged blindly, Keith succeeded where before he had failed. He turned his shoulder . . . barely enough to avoid the striking knife. Then his right elbow pumped. His fist landed solidly, crunchingly, on the great chin. It seemed to bury itself in the massive face. Roderick went down, telescoping within himself, his knees collapsing under him, his eyes glassy—sinking to the snow like a stricken moose.

Keith walked over, panting, picked up the knife. He was standing there when the giant shuddered, rose bewilderly.

Bleared, confused eyes encountered his own. A childlike helplessness clouded Roderick's face. Gradually, realization was dawning on him. Like a baffled animal, he studied the man who had mastered him. When he spoke, Keith was aware of sympathy for such a befuddled consciousness.

"I told ye she was my girl," Roderick said.

Keith shook his head. "Not yours," he said, and remembering Lenore, added, "Or mine, either," for of one thing he was certain. For her own practical reasons, even had he chosen, Lenore never would release him. She loved money and position too much for that.

Roderick's confidence was returning. He saw the knife in Keith's belt, scowled. "Next time, Barry—I fix ye. Wait."

Keith walked toward him, coolly handed back the knife. Roderick's great fingers slowly closed on it. His body seemed to tense. Then he gaped at Keith's words.

"Maybe you'll need that knife," Keith said. "You might want to skin a rabbit. We'll need food around here fast."

AS he turned away, he saw the figure of Joe Petrie, Conlon's distrustful second-in-command. Wonderment was clearly stamped in the Canuck's expression. Keith grinned. Now, at any rate, Joe Petrie realized there was no collusion of interests between Keith and the mad lord of the woods. But he didn't halt for words. It wasn't reassuring that in Roderick he had but made one enemy more.

He put both men from his mind.

Since his arrival at New America one simple wish had been close to Keith's heart. He turned off the settlement's single cleared pathway and floundered through the drifted snow to a little knoll that overlooked the river. And there, amidst the still, quiet firs, he found what he sought—the grave of Mary Keith.

Standing beside it, he saw that someone had cleared the snow from the granite shaft. His mother's name was there before his eyes. When Keith recalled that his father's hands had placed the shaft there, his lips compressed. He wondered what Mary Keith would think now—of this breach between the two men who had meant most to her in the whole world.

He raised his head. With sunset, the Northwest sky had cleared. Flaming surges of red and pink swept across it, already were fading to the purple and blue that would bring the subarctic night. In the breathless stillness, he stood there watching the coming of the glittering, motionless stars. Far-off, he heard the quick, flat yapping of a roving fox.

Now he did not doubt his reasons for coming to New America. There had been nothing quixotic, heroic in his decision. Some part of him was here, in his blood—as this granite shaft, like a sentinel, guarded the few yards of snowdrift that always for him would be hallowed ground.

So he found himself thinking. . . . *These are your people and mine, Mary Keith. Help me to help them.*

It seemed that only a miracle would suffice. He heard the creak of a footstep on the packed snow—then silence. The sound was not repeated. He turned.

Peg Conlon stood there. As he looked at her, she spoke.

"I'm sorry to come—just now."

A thought occurred to him. "Someone has cleared the snow here."

Even in the twilight, he saw the sudden rush of color to her cheeks.

"Dad wants you," she said. "A man's come from Moloch. He wants Dad to go and talk with Moloch. Dad thinks you'd better go, too."

Keith turned away. They would need that miracle now—all of them. His face was sober as he followed the girl back to the meeting house, got into his furs.

Old Conlon indicated Moloch's man—a lean, raw-boned, grizzled individual with a rifle. The piercing eyes, tobacco-stained teeth, the miscellaneous soiled and ragged skins that covered the man's body, tied on by leather thongs, fantastically stamped his identity. Timberwolf. One of Moloch's ravaging wolverines. It was written all over him—in the very manginess of his body's covering.

Keith bound the thongs of his snowshoes, slid a revolver in his jacket.

"We better mush like hell," the man said. "Moloch's bad when you keep him waitin'."

Keith looked back. From the knot of silent onlookers, Raven emerged. Keith waved him back. Numbers meant nothing now. Force, at this point, was the worst course possible. There was no sound but the hissing *swish* of the rackets as they floundered on into the wilderness.

But of one thing he was certain. Moloch was not going to get those furs.

III

A MILE down the frozen river they found the camp. An aged, water-stained tarpaulin was thrown over a tree limb, pegged before a fire. A ragged guard met them. Everywhere Keith saw men of their guide's character; starved, raffish, hard-faced, wearing every conceivable kind of garment. Some lay on their bellies by the flames. One had hallowed out a bed in the snow. If bitter poverty made for crime, these guerrillas lacked no incentive, appearing more like famished beasts than men.

They watched through slitted eyes as Keith and Pat Conlon were brought before the crude tent.

From its shadowy interior came a shrill tirade. "Damn ye, Blackie! Ye've been gone hours! Ye've kept me waitin' in the cold!"

"I wasn't long," the guide said sullenly.

"Ye lie!" screamed the voice. "I'll have the lass claw the eyes from ye livin' head! Clear out, ye bloody kite!"

The guide shuffled off, and Keith endeavored to pierce the darkness of that interior. A splutter of flame from the campfire fleetingly illuminated it, was gone. In that split-second his eyes registered an unforgettable picture. A small, bent figure squatted inside. Clad entirely in red-fox skins, it gave a fantastic impression of a giant fox. Features strangely pointed, pockmarked, increased the illusion.

The shrill voice again spoke from the darkness. "Weel, now. So ye've come to see old Moloch, hey?"

Keith was startled by the next words.

"I was told ye was there, Meester Barry." There was a dry cackle. "Fine honors ye're payin' an old mon, to come here—the laddie of the Company's Governor! Well, weel," the voice went on, "we must make ye welcome."

Keith saw Conlon stir uneasily.

Again the firelight fluttered illumination over the hunched figure in the shadows. Now Keith saw what he had had no chance to observe before. Something rested on Moloch's right wrist—some brown-and-white striped object, hooded, motionless. The flame brightened, and he saw that long talons gripped Moloch's leather-gloved wrist. There was the flash of a short length of chain. Then the curious object shifted its feet and Keith heard the high tinkle of a two-note bell. Wings, enormous, powerful, suddenly fluttered; then the fire died down, and the picture was gone.

"Quiet, lass," Moloch spoke as if soothingly. Then his voice came out at them, "A bonnie chick, Meester Barry. A great north gyrfalcon. They've been in me family for generations. In the Highlands, no doot, they still prate o' Moloch's huntin' chicks." His voice whined with enthusiasm. "Oye, I've a dour hounter here, mon. Old Moloch can always eat a pretty pigeon, when his lass is huntin' for him. Whist, I'll show ye."

The old man moved toward the tent's opening, screaming to the guide:

"Blackie, ye de'il! Stir the leetle beasties i' the trees!"

Surlily, the man obeyed. He picked up a rock, heaved it into the limbs above. A squirrel, warming itself over the campfire, suddenly leaped to a higher branch.

In that split-second, the falcon drifted from Moloch's wrist in a rising swoop.

Far too fast for Keith's eye to follow, the strike was wholly lost. He heard only the hiss of wings, the dull jarring contact. Now bits of fur and bloodied flesh sifted slowly to the snow. Then he heard Moloch's low whistle. The falcon returned.

Once more the fire leaped up. Keith saw the bird again perched upon Moloch's gloved wrist. Just for an instant he glimpsed its evil beak, curved like a short scimitar. Then it was hooded by its master.

"Losh, that's naethin'," Moloch said. "She'd do the same to a mon. She'd claw his livin' eyes out. Blood drives my lass fair mad." His tone changed abruptly. "Now for our business. Conlon, I want those skins."

As Conlon made no reply, Keith spoke. "Why should you get them? We aren't going to stand still and be robbed."

"Na, na," Moloch disavowed testily. "Ye misjudge me. 'Tis no robbin' I mean. I mean only to go in partnership. Ye can't get the skins out this winter—not by yoursel'. D'ye not see, Meester Barry? I'm but wantin' to take the skins off to market for ye. I've more than twenty men. Ye've seen 'em. They can go anywhere in any weather, fine or foul. I'll sell the furs on commission for ye. Why wait on the Company longer?"

The astounding realization came to Keith. Moloch did not yet know the entire truth. He didn't understand that the Company had flatly announced that it did not want the skins at all. He knew only that there had been some delay and that the skins were still at New America. It explained why the guerrilla had even troubled to dicker with them now, instead of grabbing the cache. Moloch probably believed that Buffalo House was actually guarding the skins.

IN the swift seconds that it took for Keith to come to this realization, Pat Conlon broke his silence. Slow-witted, his mind still filled with anger for the Company's treatment, Conlon had missed completely the astonishing significance of Moloch's words. That New America now had a club to hold over Moloch's head: the threat, in event of his attack, of Buffalo House's assistance.

But Conlon had missed this.

Scornfully, he blurted, "Wait for the Company? We ain't waitin' for the Company! They won't take the furs. They don't want 'em. Why, Wade wouldn't lift his finger that far to help us. Damn him, he said so!"

Realization of what he had said suddenly broke over him. Conlon stood there, rigid, face frozen. Keith winced for him, knowing how the man could have bitten off his tongue. But it was too late. The harm was done.

Moloch leaned forward. Keith imagined he could almost hear the quick flight of his evil, scheming thoughts. Then he laughed.

"Aweel," he said, "then ye'd best accept my offer." He turned to Keith. "No doot ye've had a fallin'-out with the Laird or ye wouldn't be here. Losh, 'tis a pity." And Keith understood that clearly, too. It was a pity, Moloch meant, that he couldn't hold Keith for ransom.

Keith said to drive the point home, "I've been disinherited."

He could see the guerrilla quiver. "Tut, mon, that's a dreadful thing," and Moloch sighed. In his wildest and most avaricious dreams, Moloch probably had never hoped to have within arm's reach the heir to the Arctic Fur Company. That he should have such an opportunity now, when it was valueless, must gall him.

His miserable reflections made him irritable again. "Ye've kept me waitin'," he said. "Come—speak up, mon. Are we partners?"

Pat Conlon appeared to have no intention of answering. Having spoken once, he had but made their situation worse. Keith removed his eyes from Peg Conlon's father and the face bitter with self-recrimination.

"The skins need baling," Keith demurred.

"Whisht," was the impatient answer. "My buckies will carry them though they're raw and red."

Keith said, "We'll have to take a vote. They're common property." His sole thought now was to be allowed to leave here unmolested.

The other abruptly spat out, "Go back and do yer votin' then. And do it quick, Meester Barry. I'm breakin' camp tonight and me buckies are wantin' to get started. I'll send Blackie with ye. He'll bring yer answer."

Keith said carelessly, "That's fair enough."

"Fair or foul, he goes with ye," Keith could hear the words ground out almost as if from a millstone. "And look ye—see he brings the right answer."

A few minutes later and they were floundering back through the drifts. Vaguely, Keith noted that the stars had been blotted out, that the wind was swinging around, the sky thickening. He went first, Conlon immediately behind him. In the rear, rifle in the crook of his arm, came Moloch's lieutenant, Blackie. There was no sound but the slurred drag of the snowshoes.

Keith wondered at what must be Pat Conlon's thoughts, but not for long. To Conlon, the decision had been made. Possibly, he believed he had won Keith around to his own, earlier, declared conviction that there was no way to hold onto the skins. Keith regretted this fact. What he now intended to do would stand a vastly better chance of success if Conlon knew his real intentions.

Upon one thing he was decided. Ridding themselves of this gun in their backs was an immediate necessity. Better now than after they had reached the settlement where there was the possibility of women and children being hit by stray bullets. As to accepting Moloch's offer, Keith had never considered it. With the furs gone went their last chance to barter. Even in the face of Wade's flat refusal, Keith yet hoped to make a deal with Buffalo House. But that was in the future.

He stumbled—or appeared to do so. He fell back squarely against Pat Conlon. Conlon, caught unexpectedly, careened into the guide, Blackie—as Keith had

prayed he might do. In a twinkling all three were down, milling in the snow. When Blackie rose, reached for his fallen rifle, he received a disagreeable surprise.

Keith's revolver rested snugly against his backbone.

"Forget the gun," Keith said. "Pat here'll carry it. Move on slowly, Blackie." He smiled grimly. "I'll be here, just so you don't lose your way."

The guerrilla snarled, "This won't get you nothin', damn you. Moloch won't wait long for his answer."

Keith answered coolly, "He'll wait for a bit, anyhow. When he comes, we'll have his answer ready—hot lead."

Suddenly Pat Conlon snorted and for the first time in days seemed to shake off his depression. Misery had set on the old man's shoulders a long time. Now Keith's words, almost magically, seemed to end his doubts.

"Hell," Pat said. "Here I've been worryin' about nothin'. All we got to do is knock off a few hungry rats!"

"That's right," Keith agreed. "Now you get the idea—we're keeping those skins!"

BUT no signs of a similar rejuvenation at New America welcomed their return. Men, women, children—all were huddled silently around the fire in the close-packed room. Twice Conlon had to bark an order before Joe Petrie found rope, bound their prisoner and shoved him down the cellar steps. They regarded Blackie through dull, apathetic eyes. Even in Peg Conlon Keith seemed to detect signs of discouragement. But Roderick squatted in a corner, regarding the girl with brooding gaze. Alone, that should have been sufficient to depress her.

When she saw Keith, her face lighted.

"They've already finished most of the food," she explained. "That's why they're so gloomy. It's all they can think of." Her lovely eyes widened. "Why, you—*you* haven't eaten a thing since you've been here."

He smiled. "I haven't been hungry," which was true. Too much had been on his mind to allow the thought of food. But now, with the mention of it, he was consciously hungry. Without a word, she fetched a cup of coffee and sourdough bread. Her expression brooked no refusal.

He listened while Conlon told the men of the interview with Moloch. Even when he announced his conviction that they would be attacked by the guerrillas that night, few stirred. The silence merely seemed to deepen. To Keith, it was peculiarly discouraging. Willingly, he had espoused their cause—to what detriment to himself, he scarcely counted. But the sight of able-bodied men indifferent to their imminent danger irritated him. He struggled to hold back the condemnation that was on his lips.

In Peg Conlon's eyes he read understanding, an unspoken plea for forgiveness for her people. His lips tightened. Then instantly he was thankful that he had not harangued them.

Because now, in better words than he could have chosen, one with a far more unquestioned right was speaking.

"Shake yerselves, ya whinin' huskies! Are the teeth in yer head only to eat with! Pick up them guns afore I tan yer backs!"

The speaker was Mama Gravois. The ninety-year-old invalid had raised from her floor pallet, supported by a pudgy elbow. Cheeks flushed with fever, her white hair stuck out in all directions. Body massive as any man's, eyes red with anger, she might have been some aged, backwoods Valkyrie. A meaty fist shook at them.

"We made this place, me'n my Pierre!" she shouted at her listeners. "This cabin where yer cringin' now. My man whipsawed the logs and I whittled the pegs. It ain't much to look at but it took us two months to build. An' we made it for men, not yeller dawgs! I ain't goin' to lie here an' have it burnt over my head!"

The room listened. Keith saw the spellbound faces, growing shame in many of them, shifting eyes. But there could be no avoiding the lash of Mama Gravois' scornful voice.

"Get on yer feet. Get up, I tell ya!" She sat bolt upright, shaking. "Keith Barry—come here, ya crazy, blessed young fool!"

He crossed the room awkwardly, took the hot fat hand she extended.

"Here's one man who'll fight!" the old woman almost spat it out. "He give up

his all to fight for ya! Him an' me—we'll beat off that skunk Moloch!"

Keith looked up. Pat Conlon had joined them, and now Peg. Raven had come silently to his elbow. Suddenly in the far corner of the room it was as if a mastodon stirred. Roderick, mad lord of the woods, tramped toward them, shoving men from his path.

"I'm comin', ma'm!" the giant roared. "By God, nobody can't call me a whelp! Aye, I'm comin'!"

Dugald raised a half-empty flask, blew fiercely into the bagpipe.

Mama Gravois suddenly shrieked, "Get up, ya dogs! We'll die together!"

Then the crowded room was in an uproar, with men shouting, scrambling to their feet, jolted clear out of their stupor. There was no resisting this fiery wilderness prophet. And New America seemed to know it.

But now the prophet was once more a weary, fever-stricken old woman. "Keith, gimme a sip of that licker," she whispered.

It occurred to Keith that this was the ideal time to tap the demijohn once all around. His eyes now saw what he could regard only as a miracle. Men looking to guns and cartridges, finding their firing-ports—stimulated by the liquor and Mama Gravois' appeal. Over all the voices rose Roderick's.

"We'll show 'em! We'll give 'em all they want!"

Keith noted how continually the giant's gaze went to Peg Conlon. Like a vainglorious boy, he seemed making his brave show for her eyes alone. Later, this dog-like devotion might have repercussions. Now it would serve their purpose. And Keith was grateful. Out there, under the stars, he had asked Mary Keith for help. She had heard, given him a miracle.

IN the chill darkness, Raven's mocassins crunched guardedly on the snow. "Listen, Sache!" the Metis said in warning. But Keith's straining ears heard nothing. For two hours they had been here, waiting. The only sound was the wind soughing through the firs overhead. Snow had begun to fall. Through its fine flakes, he made out the figure of Joe Petrie nearby. Of all the settlers, the Canuck had appeared least stirred by Mama Gravois' call to arms. His surliness had been further increased by a cut suffered when a tin cup slashed his thumb badly.

But New America was aroused. Sight of the blurred outline of the meeting-house forty yards away cheered him. At every firing-port, Keith knew, now was a rifle, a man behind it. He smiled grimly. They would give a good account of themselves when Moloch arrived.

Behind him came a sudden movement. Raven whirled, his hunting-knife quickly drawn. Keith's arm swept him back, surprise gripping him.

"More coffee," Peg Conlon's matter-of-fact voice came through the darkness. "You'll need it out here."

Keith swallowed it gratefully, calling Joe Petrie for his share.

"That's a fine habit you've got." he said.

The slim figure stood there.

"You're always on deck," he explained simply. "Whenever anything's needed—there you are. But you'd better go back now."

Instead of obeying, she said, "You heard what Mama Gravois told us. If Moloch doesn't get the skins—will he really try to burn us out?"

Keith thought of that evil old man, as he had seen him but a few hours before—testy, cruel, crazed with anger at the slightest suggestion of opposition to his will. He thought of Moloch's impoverished, wolfish followers, hardly more civilized than must have been those Cayuse and Cree war-parties who had raided this country half a century before.

He knew she wanted the truth. "There's only one thing that'll keep him from getting those skins," he admitted.

He heard her low laugh.

"That's what I thought." She held up a rifle.

"Now, look here," Keith cried. "You're not staying here. Get that idea out of your head. You're going back inside."

Raven's fingers tightened on his arm. The Metis' lips were almost against his ear. "Quiet, Sache—*they come!*"

It seemed to Keith that almost with Raven's warning, the snowfall thickened. Everything, trees, meeting-house—even Joe Petrie and the girl—abruptly were blotted out. Silently, he tested the re-

volver, his every sense straining. Slow, dragging minutes passed. Then out of the blizzard itself came a sound striking terror to his heart.

The high, thin tinkle of a two-note bell.

Instantly, Keith fathomed its meaning. As quickly, he thought of Joe Petrie's bandaged thumb, clotted with blood.

"Look out! It's a killer!"

The words scarcely passed his lips when the snowflakes were violently agitated. There came the hiss of swift wings. Keith stiffened at a scream that split his eardrums. It transfixed him with its mortal despair. Someone floundered in the drifts, shrieking. He could almost hear the strike and tear of those terrible razor-sharp talons.

Blindly he stumbled toward the uproar. Death was there, and thought that it might be the girl squeezed his heart. From far-off he heard a whistle—Moloch! Something whirled past him. He fired at it, again. The explosion sent red-orange flame across the blizzard. Then he stumbled over a body.

He bent over it. The figure moaned, was still. Someone had moved to Keith's side, was standing above him. And at the voice, relief drenched his whole being.

"Keith! Oh, Keith!" Peg Conlon asked. "What was it?"

He held her steady.

"Moloch's falcon. It's killed Joe Petrie. Moloch said blood drove it crazy."

Raven's voice said, "I take him inside now, Sache." Keith rose, tried to shove the girl behind him. But she slipped free to his side. He saw a blur in the drifts, fired. The girl brought up the rifle, and its sharp report whipped through the night. Firing, they began yard-by-yard retreat through the snow.

As they neared the cabin, a flood of light showed the door flung open. A figure, grotesquely huge, loomed on the threshold.

Roderick's voice boomed. He lifted a shotgun that stabbed fire into the blizzard. Far away a man cursed gurglingly. Roderick fired again. He stood there, holding the door until Raven carried in Joe Petrie's body, Keith and Peg followed.

The giant hurled a taunting yell out into the night, then slammed and barred the door.

A BABY woke, cried fitfully. In the darkness of the cabin the infant's protest against an uneasy dream was like their own unrest. At one of the north ports, a man fired. Outside the thick log walls sounded a shriek. The marksman muttered, "There's one o' them wolfs, anyhow!" Two shots blasted from the fire-line across the room. Cordite-reek filled the cabin now, and Keith heard a thoroughly human, every-day sneeze.

"Don't mind me, boys," Mama Gravois' voice was hearty. "Gunpowder allers did get up my nose!"

Roderick was like a stormy petrel. Not satisfied with a single firing-port, as soon as his own horizon grew too tranquil he shoved others out of line. He stamped around the walls, raging, thrusting men aside, peering from the port. Then with a jubilant oath, he suddenly stuck the shotgun out into the night. Its roar and buck seemed to intoxicate him. And Keith noted how, under the stress of excitement, the speech of Roderick's fathers commandeered his tongue.

"Aye, ye'll get it, ye whelps!" he was shouting to the besiegers. "Ye'll sup with Auld Hornie this night!"

Once he spoke to Peg. "Rest easy. That red de'il will not fire this cot t'-night!"

Keith marveled at the girl's composure. Out of Roderick's devotion, she was summoning his best effort now, without fear of the future, answering in kind.

"How could I worry," she asked, "with you here?"

From his own vantage point, Keith saw that the blizzard was blinding and bewildering Moloch's men. Continually, curses came to him on the wind. Between shots he heard them shouting to one another. But the snowstorm was not altogether a hindrance. Screened by it, the attackers were not revealed till they had reached the cabin. One of the New Americans suddenly yelled, began to tug madly at his rifle-stock. Outside, a man had hold of the gun barrel. The American won, hauled it free, then instantly rammed it through the port and fired. Keith heard the guerrilla's death screech.

"Grab my gun, will ya!" the American panted. "I'll learn ya!"

To Keith the view through his port was

like looking at a solid wall. Something moved, no more than a blur, and he triggered. Only a cry told him that this smudge against the wild night had been a man. The ease with which the attackers were able to reach these walls, troubled him. Fear was on him, turning his body's sweat cold. . . . *fire*. At the first chance, Moloch would attempt to set fire to the cabin's walls. He strained, minute after minute expecting the first whiffs of smoke.

A blazing log threw the reeking room into relief. Coughing women sat in the middle of the floor, children's heads buried in their laps. Peg was binding up a boy's arm that had been fleshed by a bullet.

Then Keith's breath stilled.

Roderick, who had broken his shotgun in order to insert fresh loads, had his back directly beneath a port. As Keith looked, through the port was thrust a lean, hairy hand holding a black-snouted pistol. From side to side, it swung, then came to rest upon Roderick's back.

Some unseen Dark Angel may have whispered in the giant's ear. His head turned until his face was squarely before the pistol. Keith saw the color whipped from his face. Paralyzed, Roderick must have known this was death—steeled himself.

The revolver in Keith's hand flamed.

At the port, the hairy wrist stiffened. For an instant, the convulsed fingers seemed to squeeze on the trigger. Then a red flow dripped down the hand. The fingers relaxed. The gun dropped thuddingly to the floor. The hand jerked back through the port.

Sweat beaded Roderick's face. His starting eyes rested on Keith, his still smoking revolver. The giant's lips moved strangely.

He returned to his own post. And the storm's violence was heightening. Through the ports swirled long streamers of snow. The wind had become a roar, creaking the cabin, loosening dried-clay chunks from its cracks. Like the wild breath of the north gods it blew upon them; and even in that awesome, frozen tempest, Keith's heart warmed. For now he knew the truth. No fires would be set by Moloch this night. Out there, exposed, no thing could live. The guerrillas were going to be compelled to draw off.

Already, it seemed to him, the dull thud of bullets against the log walls was slackening. He heard rifle-cracks only after steadily lengthening intervals. Now there were no targets for his revolver. And slow hour upon hour, the night was winnowing away in the storm. Outside was only silence. The men at the ports did not stir. Certainty of victory grew, and at seven o'clock, he knew they had won.

The night's fury of nature and man had passed. Only a light snow fell. The wind had died. And Moloch and his men were gone.

The battle was won.

The weary men were hauling in rifles. Keith was suddenly aware of Roderick at his side. No wild exultation of battle showed in the man's face now, or gratitude. Black torment, alone, was in the red-rimmed eyes.

"I owe ye me life," he said thickly, "but ye're the last I'd willing owe it to." One great fist smeared across his powder-stained face. "But I'll pay ye back. Ye'll see it. I'll never let it stand this way—never, damn ye!"

Keith had no thoughts now for jealousy, hatred. His own eyes were on Peg Conlon. He remembered the food she had given him yesterday—her own, he felt certain. He thought of her out there last night, with her rifle. He watched how she moved, soothingly, amongst the children and a great deal was clear to him.

This was as Mary Keith must have been. And now memory stabbed him. Because he knew that it was too late, even if she would have him. He belonged to Lenore, by public betrothal. And he knew Lenore. Bitterly, he realized he knew her too well. Never would she release him to marry Peg Conlon.

He turned at Raven's voice.

"Sache," the Metis said. "There is no food. It is finished."

Keith heard the cry of a hungry child. His eyes met Peg Conlon's. She was watching him quietly, composedly. No anxiety showed in her face, only perfect trust. Her confidence appalled, troubled him. She believed he could do anything; even now find food for them all.

An idea came. How slim was its possibility of success he realized far too well. But it was the only chance that offered.

With set lips, he began to pull on his furs.

THE girl rose. She asked no questions but stood at his side, waiting. Slim, steady-eyed, against this background of human misery, she stirred Keith deeply. This was the way he would always think of her.

He said, "I'm going to Buffalo House," smiled at the grimness in his voice. Time was when a trip to the Company post would have meant practically a triumphal journey. Old Dan Wade had taught him to shoot his first deer. Now he could not even guess at what might be his reception.

"You don't want to go," Peg said. "You're only going for us."

"I'd see the Laird, himself, if it meant meat on the table," he answered.

Then he saw the tears in her eyes. He had an irresistible impulse to put his arms around her, to tell her no woman, since his mother, had possessed such sincere belief in him. For a moment, he dared not look at her. When finally he turned, he was surprised to see her getting into a parka. Concern made him instantly practical.

"Where do you think you're going?"

A mischievous smile answered him.

"I don't want help," he said shortly. "I don't need a nurse."

She walked composedly across the room. Against the parka's white hood, her dark beauty was electrifying.

"You'll never need a nurse," the huge eyes were laughing at him. "But I'm going to try to get some meat on the table, too. I can shoot almost as well as you do. Raven will go with me. We ought to get a few squirrels, anyhow."

Some of the men had already gone out to bury Joe Petrie. She should be safe enough, in the company of others. He saw no sign of Roderick although Dugald was there. After last night's attack ended, the gaint had withdrawn into a sullen, brooding silence.

When Keith had laced the snowshoes, she walked with him to the door. The snowfall was steady, but much lighter. He saw how the flakes melted as they touched her warm skin. Many were the things he wished could be said. But he flinched from it. How could he add still one more complication to the host that bewildered his life?

"See you later," was all he said.

Just before the snow blotted her out, he looked back. Peg Conlon still stood there. Her arm went up in a simple gesture of farewell. Keith's heart pounded and blood rushed to his face. She had known he would look back. He was not fooling her. She knew Keith Barry better than he knew himself, and knew that he loved her.

There was no wind now. His steaming breath hung motionless in the keen air. In the Indian rackets the rise and fall of his heels, his dragging, slogging stride, became mechanical. The fall of the snow seemed timeless, eternal. He skirted the southern edge of Reindeer Lake, recognized it only because of a whiter area devoid of the dark blur of firs. Nowhere was there a sign of Moloch's men. Any blood on the snow long ago had been obliterated by the white, gentle mercy from the sky.

In this shut-off world, through which he slogged as if its sole, lonely traveler, memory tortured him. What had taken place at Hudson House after they discovered his escape? Was the Law on his trail even now? He dared think that Lenore's brother had recovered. It was an axiom that heaven looked after dogs, children and drunks.

Something rose in his path, huge, shapeless. Practically in his face it loosed a piercing shriek like that of a locomotive, then died down in a quivering, deafening bawl.

Before his fingers reached the revolver, the moose was gone.

Now he saw the strung-out wooden barrier of Buffalo House's ancient stockade. With curious mixture of emotion, he saw, on its staff, the centuries-old Company house flag. He gained the south wall, strode toward the main gate. Here he was protected from the snowfall. Underfot was only a frozen, slippery surface, untouched by last night's blizzard. Someone else had passed this way. Imprint of snowshoes was clearly recorded.

The character of the frozen prints puzzled him. This was not the weave of the regulation snowshoe issued to employees It was a stranger who had passed this way.

For the first time in his life, Keith saw that the great wooden gates were closed. It was far from a hospitable sign. Buffalo House must know that outside its walls bitterly antagonistic forces were loose, and, as in olden times, had barred itself in. The thought occurred. He would hate ever to have to storm this port, now impregnable as any medieval castle.

A century ago, when times were uncertain, Indian trappers had not been allowed within the stockade but were required to transact all business through a wicket in the gate. At his banging, it slid back. A man's leathery face showed there—Charley Skunk Eye, post utility hand. Surprise froze the old breed's face.

"Boss Keith! By God, how you?"

"Open up, Charley. I've got to see Wade."

The wicket slammed shut. After a minute, the gate guardedly swung back. Charley Skunk Eye's weather-beaten face showed a toothless grin.

"Come in, Boss. By God, plenty glad to see."

Keith noted how quickly the breed closed the gate, barred it. Otherwise there was nothing save welcome in the old man's manner.

"We find Factor," he promised. "By God, plenty quick!"

IV

KEITH'S eyes encountered a scene long familiar but now oddly poignant. He sensed the system, orderliness of generations—unshakable evidence of that power and strength which had maintained the Arctic Fur Company and vanquished its every rival. No wonder Roderick's breed, from Red Roddie down, had but broken its back against Buffalo House. He recalled the warning of the mad lord of the woods, "Ye'll never beat the Company. Man, they're fierce. They're too strong!"

His gaze went over the small, neat buildings: smithy, still used for equipment repair; storehouses filled, he realized yearningly, with food sufficient to ration a dozen settlements of New America's size. The Company fur cache adjoined it. Against the north wall was the armory and magazine. Here were kept guns, cases of cartridges, powder and explosive used for occasionally necessary blasting and clearing of wooded areas for new fox ranches.

Even now Keith felt a tingle of pride. Buffalo House was strong because men had lived and died to make it so. Yet now it needed new men and blood, and he prayed that once more Mary Keith might show him a miracle.

The breed halted at the Factor's cottage.

"Charley Skunk Eye go now," he said uneasily. "By God, Boss, you see Factor by self."

Keith smiled, knowing Buffalo House's awe of Dan Wade. It was not wholly justified. Although a disciplinarian, Wade was far from being a martinet. Keith's own boyhood had been rich in the Factor's many kindnesses.

Yet when he knocked, and a voice bade him enter, and he stood there facing the man, Keith owned to a shock. In the bearing of the erect, soldier-like figure, with its grizzled white mustache, steady gaze, Keith felt a distinct change. Now he knew the truth. Some runner had brought word to Buffalo House. Dan Wade knew that no longer was Keith Barry its heir apparent, but a fugitive outcast.

The coldness in those icy-blue eyes momentarily unsettled him. It was as if years, and not only a few days, had passed since Keith Barry had been the Company's greatest pride and hope for the future.

The Factor's voice was curt in its matter-of-fact, "Sit down."

Keith shook his head. Hurt was being replaced by anger.

"I imagine you know why I'm here."

The other did nothing to help, watching him silently.

"We don't want charity," Keith said. "We've got some of the best pelts you ever laid your eyes on. All we want, in exchange, is enough food to save women and children from starving. Will you save them?"

Dan Wade's eyes flickered, but only for an instant.

His voice was harsh as he answered. "You do a hard thing, putting it that way. You ask something completely out of my power. It's not for me to say whether women and children starve. I have my

orders. I've got to obey them. The food here isn't mine to give."

"If they die," Keith said evenly, "you won't remember orders. You'll only know you could have saved them."

The Factor stood up, face flaming. He raised a clenched fist as if he would strike Keith. Anger was choking him so that he could not even speak.

"It's up to you, Dan," Keith said coolly. "Go ahead—call the turn."

Silence filled the room. Neither man moved. The only sound was the cheerful splutter of cannel coal in the hearth. Then Keith saw that the old man suddenly had bowed his white head, sunk into a chair.

"No company in this world can thrive on the blood and bones of its victims," Keith said quietly. "The day has gone when an empire can build for the future on human misery. A hundred years ago —yes, but there were only shiftless Indians here. Probably, they were better off for being treated like slaves. But today white men are coming here, to the last great frontier on this continent. They'll keep coming. They'll come because there is no other frontier." His voice deepened with the sincerity of his own convictions. "Neither you, Dan, or this Company, or the Laird himself can stop their coming!"

The Factor raised his head, his expression haggard now. Keith saw that his words had made an impression. But wearily he also realized it had not changed the other's decision.

"God help me," the old man said. "I can't do it. I haven't the power."

Even in his moment of exasperation, Keith recalled the chilling truth of Roderick's words. The Company was greater than its enemies, more powerful even than its servants. Now, even torn as he was by humane emotions, Dan Wade could not best his Company.

There was a knock at the door, and a servant entered. He carried a tray on which reposed the Factor's lunch—mutton chops, peas, potatoes, steaming coffee, biscuits fresh from the post's ovens. Unconsciously, Keith stiffened. All at once, the full impact of his fast hit him. For a moment he was aware of dizziness.

Dan Wade saw his reaction. One rough hand went out to Keith.

"Sit and eat, sonny," he said. "Come now, I can see you're hungry."

Keith stood rigid.

"The Laird would want it," Dan Wade urged. "Eat, boy."

Keith shook his head. It startled him to think how physical weakness almost had betrayed him.

"No," he said brusquely. "I'll go now."

The factor rose, laid a hand on his shoulder. Many times in the past, Keith had experienced this gesture of friendliness. Now it did not deter him. He walked to the door, defeat making him bitter. It came to him that the Factor was speaking.

"Watch yourself, Keith. Go easy, sonny."

Something in the tone made Keith turn. Dan Wade's eyes were on him, freighted with worry.

"You're in terrible danger, Keith," he said. "I'm warning you. Not from Moloch—nor from the Company. It's the kind of danger even the Laird can't protect you from now."

For a moment Keith was held by his expression of concern. Then he shrugged. No alarm, no matter how personal, could stand beside the realization that he must return to New America and Peg empty-handed.

He closed the door, crossed the court. Charley Skunk Eye swung to open the gate, let him out. It closed instantly. Then suddenly the wicket was flung up. The breed was pointing agitatedly out into the bleak landscape. Charley Skunk Eye's voice was thin with fear.

"Watch out, Boss. Look out quick. By God, much danger out there for you."

Through the thinning snowfall, Keith saw the Company's ensign at its staff. Sight of this flag of his fathers aroused but one emotion now—anger. He cursed that flag as he tramped on through the drifts.

AN hour had passed. Cold, hunger, depression had dulled his senses. He was doggedly following the shore of Reindeer Lake when a man's voice hailed him.

"Get your hands up!"

The sudden shift from harassed thought to reality left Keith confused. Mechanically his hands elevated. Then at last he

understood the reason for Wade's and Charley Skunk Eye's warning—the true identity of the wearer of those mysterious snowshoes. He stared woodenly into a service .38. Behind the revolver was a man young, determined. His fur coat was open and beneath it he wore the red, belted coat and blue, gold-striped trousers of a Mountie.

"Stand still, Barry."

The Mountie's face struck a grim chord of memory. Now Keith recalled Corporal Magoon. It was as a student at the Royal Military College. Playing on the same lacrosse team, Keith remembered that even in that bitter, skull-crushing Indian sport, Magoon had been unbeatable. Now he was a corporal in the world's most tenacious police service, and Keith Barry was his prisoner.

"You were a fool to clear out," Magoon said. "You should have known it, Barry. You're up to your neck now."

For three days Keith had maintained a confidence wholly unjustified by the facts. Now his attitude was curiously like that of those starving people back at New America.

He asked dully, "It's that bad, is it?"

"It'll be this bad—murder," Magoon answered. "When I left, Beverly was dying."

Keith winced. Even though he was blameless, the thought that he had any connection with the death of Lenore's brother revolted him.

"You only made it worse, skipping out." The Mountie shook his head.

Despair gripped Keith. Not for himself—his anguish was deeper than that. His one thought was for the derelicts abandoned at New America. He imagined Peg Conlon back there, waiting.

His silence appeared to produce a disagreeable effect upon his captor.

"Don't think I'm getting a kick out of this job." Magoon spat in the snow. "Hell, I haven't forgotten. You pulled me out of plenty on that lacrosse team, Barry. You kept me from getting my head split open . . . well, a lot of times."

Keith said unhappily, "Forget it. Maybe you'll do the same for me sometime," and wondered why it sounded so queer.

The Mountie was thrusting something at him. "You'll have to get into these." Handcuffed, Keith was turned back toward Buffalo House.

"I was there this morning," Magoon explained. "We'll wait till I get a dog-team harnessed up. We'll need it for the trip home."

Every step, he realized now, was taking him farther from those whom he had struggled so hard to aid. Gloomily, he recalled that Buffalo House possessed a lock-up—holdover from the past when the factor had been a duly appointed magistrate with power to incarcerate all who broke the peace. His chin sank on his chest.

Keith was totally unprepared for what happened now—the sudden complete about-face of this grim destiny. He heard a trampling in the snow, a smothered oath from Magoon—a sound as of a blow.

Then his breath died with surprise.

Corporal Magoon lay in the snow. Above him stood a towering figure in white furs, still wielding the gun-butt that had struck the Mountie down.

"Aye, that'll hold ye," Roderick's voice growled. "Where's the key, Barry? I'll set ye free."

AS the steel-bracelets clicked open, Keith saw that Magoon was rubbing his head dazedly, beginning to rise. Roderick moved toward him, menacingly. Quickly, Keith stepped between the two men. He seized the Mountie's revolvers, twirling them as he waved back the giant.

"Let me finish him, ye fool!" Roderick cried. "Stand off!"

Keith shook his head. "You've done enough," he said.

Magoon was on his feet. He stood there swaying, stunned from Roderick's blow on the head. His eyes were beginning to clear and mortification showed in his expression.

Keith slipped the handcuffs on his heavy wrists with a little joke. "It hurts me to do this, Magoon," and was humanly relieved to see the slight smile that plucked at the corporal's lips.

But when the young Mountie spoke his voice was uncompromising. "If I live—"

"I don't doubt it," Keith agreed. "But I'll have to take that chance."

Then he realized that a change had come over Roderick. In that huge, child-

like countenance was an expression he had not seen before. Not gloom, but some kind of fierce triumph shone in the too bright eyes.

"We're evened up, Barry," the voice was hot with exultation. "You saved me life, now I've saved yours. Aye, me hands are washed of ye. Now I'll go me way, ye go yours." A great arm swept the horizon. "There's Buffalo House—ye stole that from me. And ye've stolen the lass I loved. To hell with ye!"

He swung off through the snow.

Keith realized that now what he most wanted was a sight of Peg Conlon. To know that she was there unharmed, alive. When finally he and Magoon reached the meeting-house, he flung open the door. The call broke from him.

"Peg!"

There was no answer, and instantly uneasiness seized him.

"Where is she?" he cried.

From the crowded room came Mama Gravois' hoarse voice, "Pat went to find out, Keith. The child's been gone for hours!"

He stiffened listening.

Outside were voices raised in excitement. Then Pat Conlon lumbered in. He was half-carrying Raven—and the Metis' face was dazed, streaked with blood. As he faced Keith, Conlon's voice was harsh and strained.

"They sent him back with the message. I just found him, half-dead in the snow. Moloch's took Buffalo House, and he's got Peg." The shaking hand extended a scrap of dirty paper.

Through starting eyes, Keith read:

I've got the House and your lass, too. Bring me those skins in one hour—or ye'll be glad when ye hear that she's dead.

HIS brain was cold. The meaning of those two lines somehow terribly intensified by the scrawl's very crudeness. He seemed stupefied, unable to move. Thought of her in the hands of that wizened murderer paralyzed his senses. How had Moloch stormed that impregnable fortress, and seized the girl.

He realized he was standing there, the letter dangling from his hand. Roderick had come in. Dully, Keith noted the giant's swagger. His face showed an exultation so burning that it penetrated even Keith's stunned senses. He was like a man who has won some great, some memorable victory.

Roderick had halted. Now he was looking around him. In their taut faces for the first time he seemed to sense the tragedy.

"Are ye all daft? What's wrong here!" He saw the paper in Keith's hand, snatched it.

Keith roused himself, spoke to Pat Conlon.

"Get your men," he said.

Then the room filled with a bellow, almost animal-like in its agony. It was like the death roar of a pole-axed steer. It chilled the heart of every listener.

Roderick stood there, Moloch's ultimatum clenched in his giant's fist.

"I didn't know Moloch had her! Before God, I didn't know he had her!" Roderick beat himself on the chest, fingers tearing at his shirt. He fell on one knee before Keith. His shaking hand held out the great hunting-knife.

"Kill me!" he was whispering. "Kill me!"

Keith's head whirled. Coming now this nightmarish spectacle was too much for him to grasp. He could only gape stupidly, wholly without understanding.

"D'ye not see?" the giant was whimpering. "It was *me!* Aye, I did it! But I did na know that de'il had the lass!" His voice rose to a deafening shout. "I got Moloch into Buffalo House. It was me who got Charley Skunk Eye to open the gate. Aye, I was sly. I gave him to drink, and he opened the gate for Moloch!"

He sprang up, his face wild. "It was a big scheme, d'ye see? Moloch was to take Buffalo House, and gi' me me rightful inheritance. It was the agreement!" His voice rose to a blood-curdling shriek. "But he tricked me. I did not know he had the lass!" His big fingers clutched at Keith. "Why d'ye not kill me? Take the knife. Cut the heart from me! Ye're the mon, Barry. I'm the dog ye've got to kill!"

Sick with that terrible betrayal, Keith turned away, revulsion shaking him. Roderick was crouched on the floor, his giant's shoulders shaking.

Slowly, Keith's head cleared. The urgency for what now they must do, steadied his thinking, and left him gripped by cold, calculating fury.

The men in the room had turned from Roderick as if from some dreadful sight. Even Pat Conlon's eyes were averted.

Keith's gaze went to Corporal Magoon.

"You know where we're going, Magoon." He tossed the handcuff key to Mama Gravois. "If we aren't back in three hours, she'll turn you loose. If we don't kill Moloch, these women and children will need a man here."

He strode to the door, joined the men who were moving out silently, eyes expressionless, fixed. Behind, Keith heard Roderick's whimpering, shuddered.

THERE was no snow, only the bite of air so intense that it gripped his face with the cold rigidity of a death-mask. The crunch of his snowshoes seemed scarcely the action of his own frozen body. He went on through the drifts, only his brain working. Alongside him he saw men moving as if in a dream.

They were outnumbered by Moloch's band, but that was not the real problem. It was to get inside those walls. Once inside the stockade, he would ask no more. Sickeningly, he recalled his earlier impression . . . that, with the need, how impregnable could be Buffalo House. His mind worried every angle, inch of that great wall—seeking an opening. Somewhere must be a weak spot, an area where admittance could be forced. Over and over he told himself that. It *had* to be so. He dared not even think of the girl.

Once he turned, gazed behind. Coming through the drifts was Roderick. He moved with the implacable, lumbering stride of an elk. Sick though he was over the giant's betrayal, Keith experienced a twinge of sympathy. Roderick had loved Peg. Probably, she was the only gentle, loving thing that ever had entered his life. Keith shuddered to picture the turmoil raging now in that massive breast.

Slowly, Buffalo House stood up against the bleak sky.

High on its icy rock, it looked down on them. For two hundred years Buffalo House had defied time, nature, every enemy. In its gigantic log walls, built from felled forest monarchs and sheer as a cliff's face, was hand or foothold for no man. Only some force, superhuman as itself, ever could hope to conquer that wall. Only some mad and glorious giant, with a mad giant's reckless strength, could have scaled those heights. The conviction left Keith shaken.

They halted. In every man's heart, Keith knew, was the despair that filled his own. The great gate, barred now, was like a door shut on all human hope. They gaped at it—tormented, baffled. Then they split up and began to follow the walls, feeling, exploring, gauging, prying. Tight-lipped, Keith was searching, foot by foot. And as he hunted, Roderick arrived. Like an infuriated animal he threw himself at the stockade. Frenziedly, he ran along its length, kicking, clawing at it, almost whining in his eagerness.

Then the men met again, before that massive gate.

Keith raised his head. No guard showed up there on the still walls, there were no taunts, shots. None was needed to guard this castle of doom. For two hundred years Buffalo House had shielded itself, asking protection of no man, invulnerable against all. And now, somewhere behind its silent walls, Death toyed with Peg Conlon. Death, sly, patient—minute by slow minute biding its appointed time.

Pat Conlon's croak broke the silence.

"We won't beat that wall. Look at it." His head shook hopelessly. "It can't be done."

Keith stared, silent.

"There ain't but one thing to do. Get them skins for him." Conlon breathed deeply. "An' it ain't the skins I'm thinkin' about."

Keith nodded. Not one of them believed for an instant that Moloch, in exchange for the pelts, would release Peg. And now a realization came. Moloch's master stroke had defeated all of them—Dan Wade and Buffalo House, themselves and New America. In Buffalo House was food sufficient for an entire winter. Easily, Moloch could stand off any siege. None out here had eaten all day. Probably, they would be dead, frozen stiff for months before Moloch's security was even threatened.

Keith turned his head. Pat Conlon had begun to climb a great spruce nearby. He went up it slowly, his panting breath steaming. Those on the ground silently watched his ascent. Conlon remained aloft for several minutes, gazing over the wall into the stockade, covering every yard. Then stiffly he climbed down.

"I seen 'em," he said. "A lot of 'em was ganged over by the armory, drinkin'. They got a liquor keg there. They're lit up two ways from Sunday. They got a man tied to a post. But I never seen Moloch," then his voice broke, "and I never seen Peg."

A sudden blast of wind skimmed the drifts, moaned through the creaking tree-tops. Keith raised his head, listening as if it were an expression of human frustration torn from his own lips. He stood there, trying to think. Two of the men had built a fire, and all moved toward it, huddled against the freezing air.

"Where was they?" It was Roderick's hoarse voice that asked the question.

Conlon looked through him, without answering.

"They was at the powder magazine?" the giant's voice held a strange excitement. His eyes were gleaming. "Aye, they was there," he repeated as if to himself. "It's the buildin' on the north wall!"

Something in that voice held them all, fascinated. Roderick's face was unholy in its exaltation. They gaped at the traitor.

Suddenly he strode to the fire, seized a burning brand. He shoved through the crowd, for a moment was lost to Keith. Then Keith's eyes widened. Roderick was climbing the spruce Conlon had just left. He went up it awkwardly, gracelessly, like a climbing bear, one hand seizing the limbs, the other carrying the brand from the fire. As they watched, he reached its height. For a moment he swayed there in the quickening wind. And now Keith saw what he had not realized before—ten feet away, and slightly below the tree-top, was the wall.

As he watched, Roderick leaped. His body hurtled through the air, hit the wall. Slipping, dangling, he fought to hold on. But he had won. And now he clung to its top. Keith saw the great body wriggle up there, high over the rocks—then, foot by foot, elevate itself to safety. Roderick stood erect. His soiled white furs were smoking. A tongue of fire leaped from him. The firebrand had ignited his clothing. He shook the torch till the sparks whipped in the wind. Now, a yell of triumph screamed down into the stockade.

"I be Roderick—damn ye! I'm comin' to take ye to hell!"

Suddenly he began to run along the wall.

From the stockade came the abrupt rattle of gunfire. Yell after yell of defiance Roderick hurled back. And now Keith guessed the truth and his lips set. Then he was racing with the others across the snow in Roderick's wake.

Roderick halted on the north wall. Keith saw him hesitate, momentarily, directly above the powder magazine. Then, with a scream, with smoke and fire trailing behind him, he jumped. The wall was empty now, after that flaming, wild figure almost lonely against the gray winter sky. Roderick had gone to wipe out that terrible betrayal.

Keith followed the example of the others, was scrambling to safety. Because now he knew this was a wall of death; for those who lingered out here, for Moloch's men inside. He reached the slope, threw himself flat. His brain raced with what must be happening behind that wall. Roderick smashing men aside, fighting his way to the armory, suddenly plunging into it—a human torch.

There was a suspended minute of ringing silence. Then it was as if some great hand picked him up, hurled him down again; rocked his every sense. Then he knew nothing.

Minutes later, when he stirred, he heard Conlon shrieking:

"Come on! The wall's down. It's blown to hell!"

KEITH stumbled to his feet, shaking his head dazedly. All around him New America's men were pouring over the blackened timbers, smoking debris. He reached the court, running. A man jumped around the corner of the smithy, fired at him. Keith's revolver spat flame and the man fell, screaming. He leaped over a body. . . . It was Charley Skunk Eye, with his head beaten in.

He heard Conlon yell, and saw Peg's

father in the act of cutting loose Dan Wade from a post. Conlon shoved a gun in the Factor's hand. Then the two old men stumbled on together, firing at the guerrillas who everywhere were fleeing. Keith raced up steps, along a gallery. He was running from room to room, frantically searching.

He darted across a landing. Then abruptly he stood still. One of Moloch's men had his back against a closed door. It was the door to Dan Wade's office. And instantly Keith knew his hunt was over. The man had seen him now, threw a rifle to his shoulder. Keith dropped at the report, then dove into a room off the gallery. There was a door to the room adjoining, and he opened it gently, tiptoed in—and through still another room . . . ever closer now to the other man.

Slowly, he inched his way back to the gallery. One look showed him he was within reach of the guerrilla, and he sprang. Then they were in each other's arms, rolling on the floor, gouging, swinging . . . and even in that moment of fury Keith heard a woman screaming.

He shook off the guerrilla, swayed to his feet. As the man charged, Keith's fist caught him full in the face. The guerrilla fell against the railing, shattered it, flipped over to the court below.

Keith hurled himself against the door, and it flew in. He fell on his knees, for an instant froze. His ears filled with that sound he recognized now so well—a two-note bell's chill tinkling.

He saw Peg dimly. She was backed flat against the dark far wall. Her hands were raised before her face. Her body shook with her sobs. Across from her crouched a figure in fox-skins, Moloch. He had already unhooded the gyrfalcon. Keith saw that now its wings were spreading. It left Moloch's wrist—and in that split-second Keith fired. In mid-flight, the falcon fluttered. Feathers seemed to fill the air. Keith hurled himself at Moloch. His fist struck him full in the face, smashing his nose. Then Keith sprang for the girl.

She was in his arms, when an inhuman shriek spun him around. The wounded falcon danced crazily on the floor—wild for vengeance. It dipped a broken wing, skittered toward Moloch. The bloodied nose was all needed to drive it mad. It struck again and again—the terrible talons clawing, Moloch's shrieks making the room hideous.

Keith had lifted the limp girl, was carrying her from the room. At the door he glanced back at the figure on the floor. It was still now, and he shuddered as his eyes came away.

Outside, men were standing in a huddle in the center of the smoking court. Even from here, Keith could see that they were New America and Company men. Peg was beginning to revive now. She moaned, opened her eyes. He set her down. Then she saw him and what she did must have been instinctive. She came blindly to him and his arms opened for her.

In his ear, she was crying. "Stay with me, Keith. Don't leave me. Don't go away any more."

He held her closely. His face was savage. He would not leave her. Not even Lenore could make him—nothing would part him from her. No man and woman belonged more to each other. Then his head raised. Someone had come onto the gallery. As Keith looked up, his heart was suddenly constricted, dead in his chest.

It was Corporal Magoon, his face miserable in its every set line.

"God help me, Barry," he said. "Don't make it tougher than it is now."

Peg's eyes had opened—widened. She was watching, stupefied, like a sleepwalker. She saw Keith holding out his wrists to the other man. Then he was saying gently, "I've got to go, Peg. I'd have to go sometime."

He turned to Magoon and she saw the smile she knew so well. "All right, Corporal. Come on," he said. "It's true what they say about you fellows, after all."

She was standing there, stricken speechless, as he preceded the Mountie down the thumping wooden stairs.

V

CORPORAL MAGOON walked beside Keith into Hudson House. They had made the trip by dog-team, Dan

Wade accompanying them, and it had been a long hard trip. But he had eaten, and now Keith felt that he had his feelings under better control. But it hurt to see how the Hudson House servants stood there silent, unresponsive as he came in. Dan Wade spoke to Magoon, left them.

For a long time, it seemed to Keith, he and Corporal Magoon waited in the front room. His mind was still dazed, and it took sustained effort to face the future with anything like composure. He raised his head. A door had opened. He rose, suddenly speechless with the hugeness of his surprise. A nurse stood there, beckoning to him.

"Come, Mr. Barry—he wants to see you."

He and Magoon entered a darkened room. A man, his head bandaged, lay on a cot in the corner. He sat up, and Keith's breath froze.

"Keith!" said Bert Beverly. "Man, I've wanted to do this for a long time!" He grabbed Keith's arms, saw the handcuffs. He turned to Magoon. "Get those things off, Corporal. There are no charges against Mr. Barry. I've told the whole thing. Your people have my story now. I was drunk and hurt myself. They know that now."

Then he smiled wanly, "No—I didn't die. And it looks like I'm not going to."

Keith was rooted there, still too stunned to speak. Vaguely he realized that Bert Beverly's face was clouded.

"I've got terrible news, Keith," he was saying. "You've got to take it on the chin."

Keith stared.

"It's Lenore, Keith," her brother said heavily. "She's run off with Ronnie Waldron. They were married in Toronto yesterday."

A great weight suddenly lifted from Keith's heart, and he stood there, vibrant with it, tingling with it. Then, instinctively, he turned, knowing someone had come into the room behind him.

It was the Laird.

The old man came toward him, his step uncertain. His face seemed to be working strangely. It rung Keith's heart to see him so affected.

"Wade's told me," the Laird's voice was freighted with pain, mournful. "He's told me all. How you and the Americans fought and freed him. And now I see it all . . . like you, Keith. We could change a lot of things." He raised his head. "Laddie, will you not take my hand?"

Keith had him in his arms.

And he thought, Roderick had been right. Perhaps never could he have beaten the Company. But there had been another way to join Mary Keith's people with the Laird's own—not to fight each other but to stand side by side.

He looked at the Laird and slowly began to grin. "Twenty-five years ago," he said, "you found a bride in the wilderness."

"Aye, laddie, 'tis so," the old man's eyes were twinkling again.

"All right," Keith said, "find me a dog-team. I can do what you did. I'm going back there to get us another bride."

* * *

They stood there together, and now that Keith had Peg, he knew he would never leave her again. From the dining hall of Buffalo House came shouts, laughter. New America was in there to the last man, sitting at a groaning table board, making up for lost time.

Keith halted with Peg to watch a moving spectacle.

By the north wall stood a pile of broken timbers, stones. It was a crude tomb and in it lay the remains of Roderick, mad lord of the woods. On the little mound, Dugald had laid the powder-blackened white fur cap. The Scottish piper stood there, in the light snowfall, erect, almost soldierly. And he was blowing into the bagpipe *Cock o' the North*—song of the Highland fighting men. Then an ancient dirge for a Scottish chieftain dead.

Keith remembered how Roderick had yearned for what he had called "his rightful inheritance." He thought of his wild clan who had fought for it, from Red Roddie down. And as they stood there, he told Peg Roderick's story.

Her eyes were wet as she looked up at Keith.

"Perhaps he's at peace now," she said. "The prince has come home."

They heard the ping of a rifle, and the coffee pot leaped off the fire.

THE BLIZZARD WAIF

By DAN O'ROURKE

Gray and wise was Sergeant McBayne. But he needed all his lore of law when both Gerry McCann and Milly Gorman told him—"I shot Bully Gorman."

"BLAKELY me boy, she's a cold hard wurrld." Sergeant McBayne burrowed his nose deeper into the upturned collar of his fur coat, and blinked the frost from his whitened lashes.

"Quit your jokin', Sarge," returned Constable Blakely. "What more could mortal

man desire than forty-five below and a head wind? 'Tis a climate to make your South Sea Islander shimmy with envy."

"If I had half the sense me gray hairs call for," rumbled McBayne, "I'd be toastin' me toes at the detachment heater. This is what comes of possessin' a warm heart and havin' a man-eatin' buck constable to provide for. If we shoot nothing by noon, it's home sweet home an' bannock an' beans."

"Just hark at the man!" scoffed Blakely. "As if a peppy youngster like me would ever miss fresh meat. 'Twas entirely on account of my thin-blooded ailing superior officer that I consented to roll out this morning at all."

With the good-natured badinage and never-failing humor that make life bearable on those lonely double detachments of the great white north, the two men continued their way along the shore line of the Big Bear Lake in the upper Liard country. The wind whistled shrilly from the mountains, whirling and drifting the powdery snow. The bright sun rayed not a particle of heat.

Blakely flung off a mitten and jerked up his Lee Enfield as a big buck deer sprang from a nearby thicket. As the constable snatched cursing at the bolt, the deer turned and stared, then trotted slowly away.

"Haw! Haw!" roared McBayne. "Kiss your dinner good-bye, mister hunter. I s'pose 'twa only your anxiety to feed your ailing superior that allowed ye to rush out this mornin' without wiping the oil from your bolt? Any but a rank tenderfoot would know that oil film freezes at forty below."

With a sheepish grin Blakely forced the frozen bolt out, and carefully wiped it dry.

"Hullo, here comes a visitor!" he exclaimed.

A figure rounded a point on the lake, snowshoeing rapidly toward them. As it drew nearer, McBayne recognized the free easy stride and loose swinging arms.

"Gerry McCann for a dollar. What's he doing so far from his trap line, I wonder?"

"The laughing Irishman, eh?" put in Blakely. "Hello, Gerry, how's the fur market?"

The newcomer waved a greeting and shook the frost rime from his collar as he came up.

"Good day, Sergeant. Howdy, Blakely. Lucky I ran across you. I was on my way down to the post to give myself up."

Tall and clean-limbed, a six foot chunk of solid meat and bone, Gerry McCann was typical of the rugged pioneers of that wild north. His frank open face bespoke intelligence and honesty. McBayne shot him a quizzical glance.

"What's the trouble, Gerry?"

"I want to surrender myself. I shot Bully Gorman, down at his cabin yesterday." The man spoke evenly, and returned the sergeant's stare without a tremor. McBayne pondered a while.

"Where's the body?"

"In the cabin where he dropped."

"Where's his wife?"

Gerry hesitated at the question, and the first sign of emotion entered his voice.

"Gone," he replied. "I went down to Gorman to have a show-down over our trap lines. Although he agreed to abide by the boundaries you set last season, he's been on my line springing my traps right along. Well, I went down yesterday to his cabin. He'd been drinkin' and rowin' with Milly from the look of things. He started in to curse and I got pretty hot, and we went at it thick and heavy for a while. Milly got scared and pulled out with the sleigh and the two dogs. At last Gorman grabbed his rifle and ordered me out. I hated to back down to him. He fired a shot—pretty close to my head. I thought he meant murder, so I jumped him and grabbed at the rifle. We wrestled round a bit, both hanging onto the gun, then Gorman tripped. It went off and killed him. I started to look for Milly, but it was storming by that time and the drift had covered her tracks. I thought perhaps she might have headed down to the post to you fellows."

AS Gerry concluded his recital, McBayne's mind was hitting on all six. The ability to formulate a tenable theory and act on a quick decision had brought the sergeant to his present pre-eminence as the most successful crime detector that country had ever known.

"Well," he said finally, "first job is to

locate Gorman's wife. If she was out through that storm she may be frozen to death. You go to the post, McCann. As you've surrendered of your own free will I don't suppose you're likely to run away. Got any weapons?" Gerry shook his head and opened his coat. "Frisk him, Blakely. Nothing? All right. Blakely, head in from here and strike the trail leading west from Gorman's cabin. I'm going to make a little trip on my own."

McBayne left the lake shore and swung north through the woods. After a ten-mile mush he paused on a ridge to get his bearings.

"Gerry's main cabin should be due north of that tamarack," he figured.

Without a bite since early morn, he tightened his belt, and faced a further twenty-mile mush with a good-natured oath.

"Think where he's been, think what he's seen; think of his wages, and Gawd save the queen!"

—he parodied, as he slithered down gullies and clambered over windfalls. "Oh, well, it's all in the day's work."

Late that night he fumbled with half frozen fingers at the latch of Gerry's cabin.

"Empty. No luck," he muttered.

Starting a blaze in the tin heater he rummage some grub, and hastily gulped down a makeshift meal.

The warmth of the little cabin tempted McBayne, but he rejected the unspoken invitation of McCann's disordered bunk. The confusion of blankets, however, distressed his ingrained sense of neatness, and he moved to restore it to order. As he lifted the canvas bag that served as a pillow, he uncovered an object beneath it —and gave vent to a long low whistle.

"Oh-ho! So that's the way the land lies!" he muttered. He slipped the object into an inner pocket.

Then he bundled into his fur coat, doused the lamp, and stepped out into the whistling, bitter cold.

"Gerry's second cabin is on the north fork of Whisky Creek," he ruminated. "The way the trap line runs, it's nearer to Gorman's by fifteen miles than this one. I might have gone there first, however."

He shrugged his shoulders and mushed on. The sky clouded up and flurries of wind snatched in swooping gusts through the pines.

"Working up for another blow, and more snow with it." He quickened his pace. "Well, Mac me boy, if you've got the right hunch, the stage will soon be set for the great drama entitled: 'Alone I did it.' 'Or, Gorman Avenged.'"

BY dawn he reached McCann's second cabin. His eyes turned bleak when he saw no eddy of smoke from the stove-pipe. Discarding his snowshoes, he stepped to the door, kicked the snow away, and entered.

The cabin was empty. He had expected to find Milly Gorman there, a fugitive from the tragedy at the Gorman cabin. Now his mind raced over the rough country that lay between the Gorman place and this empty line cabin. In this weather—

He stepped out, closed the cabin door, and renewed his fight against the drifts. He remembered the ravine pocked with caves, and turned his steps that way. Milly Gorman might have sought refuge there.

He was right. Halfway up the shallow ravine, he caught the faint whiff of wood-smoke. Then he saw a flicker of light. Soon he stood at the entrance of a small cave, sheltered from the biting wind, and saw Milly Gorman huddled before a small fire.

Fearful she sat, a hand at her throat. She was a lovely girl still, despite the ravages of Bully Gorman's brutality. Breathing hurriedly, she watched her visitor.

"Good day, Mrs. Gorman. I hope you're not afraid of me. I'm not really such an old villain as I look," laughed McBayne. Milly remained silent. "I just wanted to hear your version of what happened the day before yesterday, when McCann was at your cabin."

"Oh—I—really, I don't know anything!" she exclaimed pathetically. "They quarreled, Gerry and my husband. I was afraid, so I took the dogs and left." She looked appealingly at McBayne, her hands twisting nervously.

"Did you know that Gorman is dead?"

She shook her head, and big tears welled from her eyes.

"This is a heluva job for a man-sized policeman!" was his unspoken comment.

"Brow-beating this little lassie! But I've got to straighten this thing out."

"Now Mrs. Gorman," he resumed, "Gerry has given himself up for the murder of your husband, and made a full confession."

Sobbing convulsively Milly dropped her head to her arms.

"It'll likely go hard with him," went on McBayne, feeling like ten cents in coppers, "so I thought that if you knew anything that would be likely to help him at his trial—"

"Oh, no! He mustn't—he can't be—I— Oh, I must tell the truth! Gerry never killed my husband. It was me. Listen. Please, you must believe me! He was drunk and beastly. He—I thought he was going to beat me. I got the rifle to scare him. He laughed and kept coming toward me, and—and I fired—" She broke off in a torrent of tears.

"Steady now, Mrs. Gorman. Where does Gerry get in on all this?"

"I ran from the cabin. I just wanted to get away—anywhere—and I met Gerry. He was coming down to see my—to see Gorman. I told him what had happened, and he told me to come up here. I never meant him to take the blame, or I would never have come!" she continued wildly.

"Do you know any particular reason why Gerry McCann should shoulder your troubles, Mrs. Gorman?"

Her eyes dropped. "Why, no—although I sometimes thought he might have cared, if things had—had been different," she concluded lamely.

Unbuttoning his breast pocket, McBayne drew out a faded photograph.

"Did you ever see that before?"

"Why certainly. I lost it last summer. It was the only picture I had of myself. Wherever did *you* get it?"

"I found it under the pillow in Gerry's cabin last night."

A deep flush suffused Milly's face as she tucked the picture in her dress.

At that instant they heard the *ping* of a rifle, and the coffee pot leaped off the fire. McBayne snatched at his revolver, but almost instantly returned it to its holster. He had seen, out of the corner of his eye, whence the bullet had come. There was only one man in the region who could shoot at that range and plant his bullet exactly between the Mountie and the girl—and that man was McCann.

McBayne understood. McCann, trailing him, had seen him questioning the girl, had feared for her safety, and had shot to impress upon the redcoat McCann's own desperate mood. McCann wanted to be arrested—so that Milly Gorman might go free.

The girl had crouched into the shadow of the cave wall. "What was it?" she whispered.

McBayne smiled cheerfully. "Just a signal."

"Oh," said Milly.

"Now, Mrs. Gorman," snapped McBayne, in a business-like tone, "you know how much Gerry thinks of you, and I guess you are glad to do what you can to help him. I want you to go to McCann's north-fork cabin. I have another visit to make. Believe me when I say that you have nothing to fear over this matter. I'm sure you can trust me." Milly smiled through her tears.

"There was never a Mountie in this country that I couldn't trust," she answered. "I'll stay here."

BY midnight McBayne had reached the Gorman cabin. A stark silence hung around the place, and the door hung gapingly ajar.

Thrusting it wide, McBayne entered, lit the lamp, and surveyed the scene. Glittering frost enveloped the walls, encrusted thick on the projecting nail heads. An overturned rum bottle lay amongst the frozen remnants of an interrupted meal. Pitched forward near the cook stove sprawled the body of Bully Gorman, legs twisted and arms outflung. On the floor lay a rifle.

Lighting a fire, McBayne thawed out and then proceeded to an examination of the cabin. Picking up the rifle he ejected and counted the cartridges. With a non-committal grunt he made an entry in his note-book. He then subjected the dead body to a rigid scrutiny. As the examination proceeded he could not repress an exclamation of surprise. He finally arose, apparently satisfied with the result of his labors.

After a supper of beans and canned tomatoes, he yawned and stretched.

He dragged the body outside and turned in.

The morning broke cloudy and threatening.

"Thirty-five miles to the post, and a blizzard in sight. Well, here goes," muttered McBayne.

Through livid-lipped valleys, over shadowy hills, with tireless energy he swung his lean frame. With a gasp of thankfulness he struck the upper end of Big Bear Lake.

On, on through the buffeting blizzard and whirl of seething snow. Night fell, black and menacing. The unceasing wind penetrated and numbed.

Down at the post Constable Blakely and Gerry McCann finished their third rubber of cribbage as the clock struck three a.m.

The door crashed open as McBayne staggered in.

"Suffering snakes! Where the blazes did you come from?" yelled Blakely, unbuttoning the sergeant's coat and ripping off his moccasins. "Stoke up that fire, Gerry. Get the coffee pot goin' and fry up some grub."

McBayne fumbled chunks of ice from his bushy eyebrows as he sipped the boiling black coffee.

"Blakely, me son, this is no weather for your thin-blooded ailing superior officer to be at large in."

He grinned as Blakely slapped him affectionately on the back.

"You tough old timber wolf, I'd like to see the storm that would bowl *you* over. Have some more coffee and spill the news. We got no track of Milly Gorman."

McBayne shook his head. "No news except that we take a trip to Gorman's cabin in the morning. This storm will blow itself out soon. I want you to come along, too, Gerry. I guess we'll need you."

Gerry shot a keen look at the sergeant and nodded without speaking.

The dawn broke crystal clear after the storm, and the three men were up and away in good time.

"We'll go in by way of Gerry's second cabin," said McBayne. "I've some business there."

Gerry wheeled and stared. He opened his mouth to speak, then resumed the trail in silence.

When the cabin was reached Gerry was ahead, and bounded through the door.

"Milly!" he shouted.

SHE came forward with a faltering step. He placed a protecting arm around her shoulder and faced the two policemen.

"Oh, Gerry!" she wailed. "I couldn't let them think you did it. I—"

"Hush, you!" said Gerry, and turned with blazing eyes to McBayne.

"'Tis busy you were, all right," he sneered, "grilling a defenseless woman. Divil a bit will ut help ye, though. She's all het up an' nervous, an' not responsible for what she said. I defy ye to prove I'm lyin' when I say 'twas I shot Gorman!"

"Tuh, tut, man, cut out the heroics and listen to your uncle," put in McBayne. "A fine pair of amateur conspirators the two of ye are. "You—" he snapped, thrusting a forefinger at Gerry, "you never killed Bully Gorman. You told me Gorman fired at you before you jumped him. Only one shell was fired from that rifle, and the empty case is still in the gun. The other nine shells are in the magazine. So much for your story."

He turned to Milly. "And you—" he cried, "never shot Gorman, either!"

"What?" cried Milly and Gerry in unison.

"That bullet you fired, Mrs. Gorman," went on McBayne, "I dug from the cabin wall. It missed Gorman by two feet, which is pretty good aiming for a woman at that. Gorman was never shot at all. There's not a mark on his body. When he heard that gun go off, he dropped. But he wasn't shot. A combination of booze and bad temper, causing heart failure, is what dropped him. Just another word, Mrs. Gorman. Hang on to that wild Irishman there. As he was so anxious to die for you, he ought to make a pretty good stab at living for you."

Gerry tightened his hold on Milly's shoulders as she turned and smiled up at him.

McBayne winked prodigiously at Blakely.

RED GOLD of RISING DOG

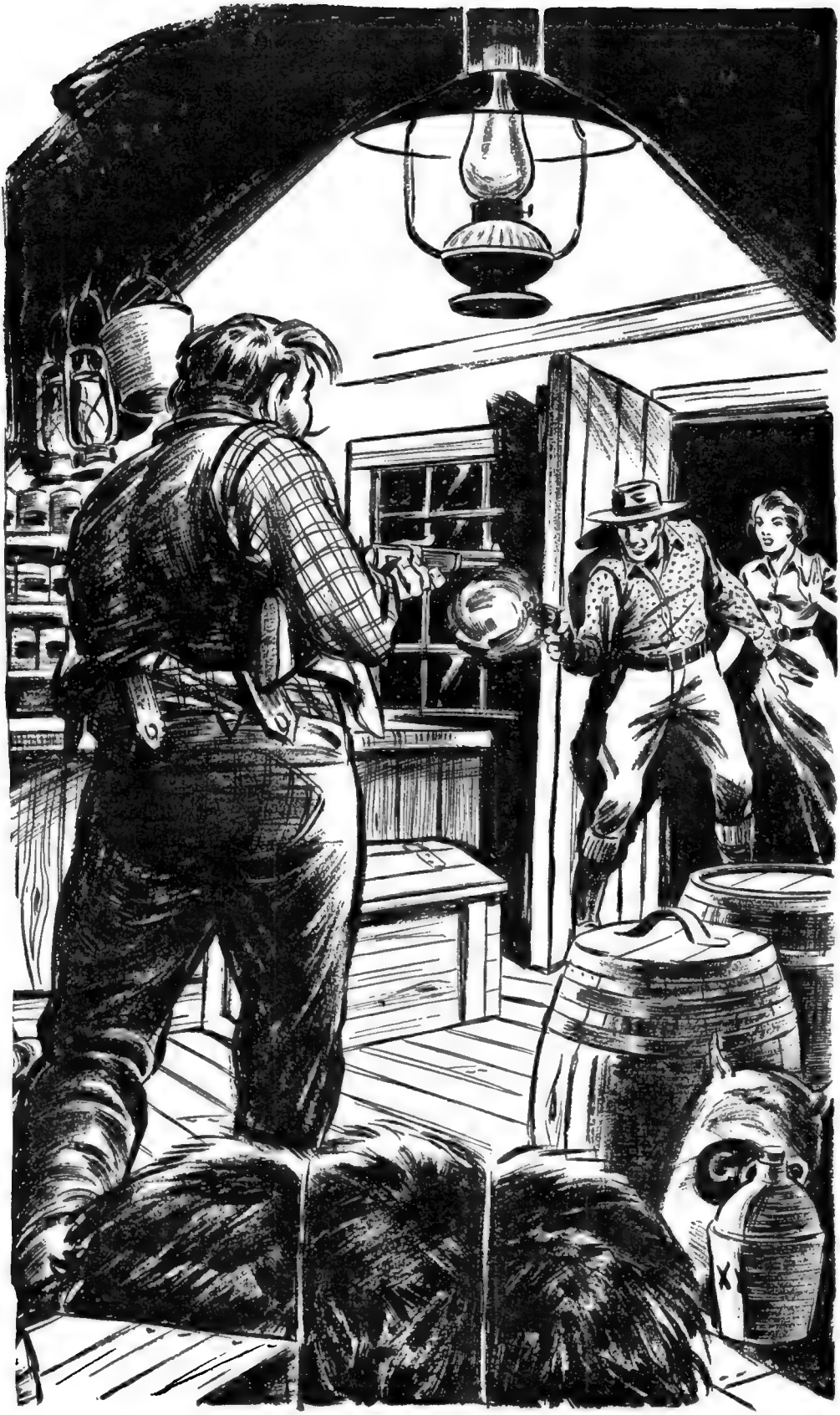
By WILLIAM R. COX

In the long night of the wasteland, men hounded by greed find a cloak for deeds blacker than the Northern night.

A Novelet of the Mounted's Fidelity.

BART NELSON'S snowshoes crunched doggedly northward against a wind that relentlessly blew fine particles of frozen vapor against his face. He lowered his head and plowed along, bowed under his pack, his parka hood tucked tightly about his mouth. His breath froze solid, but his sturdy legs carried on.

Bart, braced at the counter, leveled his gun. Cocteau and Morey fired.



It was late and the eternal night was darkening. He topped a rise, descended slithering down the farther slope. Dimly, then, he could see the hillocks which looked for all the world like a dog rising from sleep—the greater slope of its haunches; head and forelegs stretching lower, but fingering out beyond the head of Rising Dog Creek.

He was in the ravine which he sought. The black bulk of Paul Cocteau's trading post cabins jumped at him out of the whiteness of the banked snow. He sucked in a breath of frigid air and redoubled his speed. It had been a hundred-mile trek since he had the message from Paul and this was not the season for overland hiking in the Yukon country.

Dogs yipped and growled, according to their nature, the cabin door thundered under Bart's attack. Paul's cheery voice said, "Open! Open, you fools! It is Constable Bart! I knew he would make it!"

Inside the large cabin which was the store, the warehouse and the living quarters of the Frenchman, the glowing stove spat at the frigid northern scene, then the door closed behind Bart and he could emerge from his cocoon of furs and come fully alive again.

"Howdy, Paul. Jake, Toothy—howdy."

Bart Nelson was six feet high, narrow-hipped, long-legged lean. Red cheeks and blue eyes betrayed his English ancestry. He wore the uniform of the Royal Canadian Mounted.

Paul Cocteau, round-bodied, jolly, his black hair crinkling with spots of gray, his mustaches always waxed to perfection, said, "I grieve that we were forced to send for you, *mon ami.*"

"Business is business," said Paul. "Who killed Holloway?"

JAKE HELLER and Toothy Grey were sourdoughs, husky, silent, dour. Jake wore a spade beard of deep red hue. Toothy resembled nothing more than a beaver, and his close-set eyes were watchful, suspicious of everything and everyone. Neither miner spoke. Paul Cocteau said worriedly,

"We cannot be sure. There was a chechako, working Rising Dog Creek. A man named Morey Sandell. . . . But have a drink, Constable! Warm yourself. Holloway will keep—in thees weather, eh?"

He grimaced, reaching for the bottle of twelve-year-old rye which he reserved for himself and special guests. He produced another, lesser bottle for the two miners, who accepted it silently.

Jake Heller growled suddenly, "Come down on Holly at his claim. I seen the tracks, Nelson. Never give him a chance."

Toothy's voice seemed to be strained through his buck incisors. "Holly was on'y takin' a look in the sluice box. He didn't mean no harm. . . ."

Bart said, "You mean Holloway was at the chechako's claim when he was shot?"

Jake scowled at Toothy, but Paul said smoothly, "Holly was anxious to see what Sandell was taking out. You know how the boys are, Constable Bart. They only take a living out of eet, eh? They worry about Rising Dog Creek! Foolish. There is that about the gold which makes us all foolish. Even me! I file the claims on the Creek—what do I get? Jake and the boys maybe wash a leetle for me once, twice. Then—nothing! You know there is leetle gold in the creek!"

"If there was plenty gold, there'd be plenty after it," growled Heller. "We git enough and a boom would kill it. Paul stands to make plenty if there was a boom. . . ."

"I do not want a Dawson City here, in my valley!" said Paul Cocteau. "I like it here, quiet, with good friends to come and visit and maybe once, maybe twice I go to town, act foolish. That chechako, he came from United States territory!"

Well, it was a case of look for the chechako, Morey Sandell. It was a case of take the long trail, even going over the border if necessary. Bart had heard that the new settlement near the boundary, on the American side, was raw and wild.

Cocteau was taking the whiskey too fast, Bart saw. Heller and Toothy had finished their bottle and were red-eyed with rage against the absent murderer of their friend. Bart shook his head and asked to go to his cabin. He left the three of them chorusing threats against Morey Sandell and the squaw showed him a warm bunk in a small cabin behind the store.

Upon impulse he said to the Indian woman, "This Sandell. The chechako. No good, huh?"

The woman's dark eyes flashed. She

said, "Plenty good! Make um presents. Make unfriends Dogribs."

"Oho!" said Bart Nelson. "Like that, eh?"

He wrapped himself in furs and slept. He was very tired and tomorrow would be rough going. . . .

II

THE boundary town reeled under the impact of winter and the regime of gold-hungry men. Up and down the snowy ways rambled mackinawed miners, furred gamblers, wide-eyed chechakos and Bart Nelson.

Bart wore a checkered mackinaw and fur cap. His uniform coat was in his pack—it was of no avail here in the American port. The self-elected boss of the crude town, one Blackie Smith, had been jovial, but had insisted that none of his "boys" were murderers.

So Bart hid his red coat and walked through the frozen streets. His law-respecting soul, bred in the precepts of the Mounties, was shocked, but his gorge rose most at the plain evidence of exploitation of women and greenhorns. The dance halls were depraved dens, the bars served bad whiskey, young girls were painted and bedizened and soulless.

And no one cared. He wandered about, staring, disbelieving that there was no law. He knew Dawson City, had helped clean it up. The Mounties had Dawson under their thumbs. It had been bad there—but this was fearful. He saw two men follow a drunken miner up alongside a dance hall and could stand it no longer. He went after them.

The two men closed in silently, in perfect teamwork. Bart stepped faster. They had the miner, one on each side. They propped him against a wall. One raised a short bludgeon to unnecessarily stun the drunken man. The other was already ripping at his jacket.

Bart swung one blow at the man with the club. He got his fist against bone, and the man went down. The second wheeled and drew a long knife.

It was pitch dark in the alleyway and Bart could not distinguish either man. In a moment he had locked the wrist bearing the blade and was in a struggle for his life. The thug was very strong. The second man, half-conscious in the snow, interposed a leg and Bart went down, the knife-wielder on top. The blade hovered over the fallen Mountie.

Bart heaved. He roared, "I'll give you law if you don't recognize it!" He slammed a fist home against the man's head. The prone thug rolled over and got to his feet. He grabbed the arm of the second attacker. They both broke and ran as the drunken miner faced them, weaving a little but ready to take part in the affray.

Bart steadied his companion. He said, "You'd better go to your cabin. They almost had you."

"Name's Sandell," said the man, offering his hand. "Morey Sandell."

Bart said numbly, "Sandell? You're Morey Sandell?"

"The same," nodded the other. "Come have one, eh? Here's Lulu's—right next door. Best whiskey in town."

He pushed Bart firmly into the famed establishment.

THE place was jammed and the piano was going.

Bart stared at his companion. Morey Sandell was young. He was white-faced, and there were dark circles under his eyes and his wrists were nothing but bone.

"No use foolin'. I've had a bad run of luck. Those devils would have got nothing from me for their pains. And I had a fortune in my hands, too."

Sandell seemed to sober for a moment. He said, "Maybe I'll tell you about it. Some day. Maybe tomorrow, if you'll come to my place. You helped me—I need a man to help me."

A tall woman laden with diamonds loomed beside them. She was very beautiful and she smiled, tapping Sandell on the shoulder. She said, "Professor, will you oblige?"

Sandell said, "With pleasure." He drained his whiskey, bowed to Bart. He threw off his coat and weaved through the crowd to the piano, where a weary man arose gratefully to give him the bench. The thin young man sat down and rubbed his hands together, staring off into space, as though he had suddenly departed from this wilderness and all it portended. The claw-like hands reached out, caressed the keys without sound for a moment.

Then they seemed to pounce. Dissonances soared from the instrument in crashing crescendos. Bart's hair stood on end at the wail of a tortured soul which beat upon his ears. A hush fell upon the motley assemblage.

The music changed abruptly, became smooth and tinkling, and the mood changed, and everyone smiled or cursed again and the nimble hands leaped and skipped and a cigarette dangled unlit from Morey Sandell's lips, placed there by a slim girl in a white dress who appeared from the rear.

Sandell was watching the girl now, his blue eyes intent. She was dark-haired and her body was strong and straight. She was simply attired in the plain dress and there were no jewels upon her person. Her features were unrouged, patrician almost, Bart thought. She was the first woman he had seen in the settlement who appeared human. . . .

Yet she came forward to sing, in this dive. Sandell's music mooted, the simple melody of "Loch Lomond" wafted down.

The song ended, again the music altered tempo. The girl's eyes grew darker, larger, her head went back. The gay, gallant chords of "Dixie" rang out and she sang the old song for all it was worth and the Americans leaped and shouted and threw gold pieces upon the dais, and the rebel yell broke up the act, and Morey Sandell came down from the piano, with the girl upon his arm.

SANDELL seemed quite sober now. The girl's name was Kate Magruder, she was from Georgia, in the States.

She said, "We are through here for the time being. Won't you come to my place for a cup of coffee? Please—let us talk."

Bart found himself leaving the saloon, walking to a snug cabin in an out-of-the-way spot between Morey Sandell and the girl. Sandell was silent, the girl carrying the burden of the conversation. Since the Englishman had sobered, he seemed lax, indifferent. He followed the girl's lead without question, but his interest was gone.

They built up the fire in the stove and put on the coffee pot. Kate Magruder said, "It's a present from home—this coffee. There's none like it around here!"

KATE MAGRUDER talked. The small stove was redder than cherries, but no redder than her parted lips. Bart Nelson listened and inside him there was turmoil such as he had not known in his young life.

She was saying, "Morey found gold on Rising Dog. But the men up there jumped his claim and ran him off. Morey is an engineer—he knows about gold. I know nothing but that he got a raw deal up there, sir!"

Bart said, "Who ran you off, Sandell?"

The Englishman raised his white face. His voice was thick, dead. "There were three of them. Jake Heller and a man called 'Toothy.' A thin scoundrel named Holloway. The trader was away on a hunt . . . Cocteau. They came in on me with rifles and told me that if I came back they would kill me. I'm a bad shot, Nelson. . . ."

"A bad shot!" said Bart. "How bad?"

Morey passed a hand over his light blue eyes. "Just rotten with a gun. Never could shoot one. And—I'm no rugged fighter. The lack of law in this country appals me. I'd have chucked it had it not been for Kate."

Bart said, "H'mm. What do you propose to do about it all, Miss Magruder?"

She said, "I believe in Morey! He has been ill. He drinks too much! But if he had an outfit and would go back and enlist that man, Cocteau, and if he had me along to stand by him—he could take gold from Rising Dog!"

Bart said half to himself, "Paul. Yes, perhaps." He took out his tobacco and handed it to Sandell, watching the man closely. He held a match to Sandell's pipe.

He said, "You'd have to hire an Eskimo and get in shape by running the dogs. Then you could try it on the spring break. You ought to get out of here—go to Dyea."

The girl leaped to her feet. "Then you'll stake us? You can do it? You will?"

Morey said eagerly, "I'll give you a half interest in Rising Dog. I can re-file on my claim—or stake a new one. I tell you there is gold in that creek! A bonanza. I know!"

Bart said, "Perhaps. I'm no miner.

However, I have some money." He had saved it frugally from his slim pay. It was all he had in the world—and it would take years to replace it. He had fallen into the Northern habit of carrying it on him, in a belt. He took it, and handed it to the girl. "It's enough to buy some malemutes. Enough to keep you going until spring."

The girl's arms went around his neck, she hugged him. She said, "You're good! I knew you were good when I saw your face! What is your first name, Mr. Nelson?—so that we can be truly friends!"

"Uh—Nelson is my name," stammered Bart. "Nelson Smith!"

Morey was shaking his hand. The young Britisher was glowing with new life. He said, "Cocteau seems honest. He has Indians about. If we can hold off that Heller and his friends long enough. . . ."

"But where shall we see you?" cried Kate. "You've told us nothing about yourself! How will we know where to get you?"

Bart said, "I'll be at Rising Dog.—in the spring."

"You know the country there?" asked Morey.

"Yes," said Bart. "But don't mention me to anyone. Remember that! Not to a soul! This must be secret."

"I've kept the secret of Rising Dog," nodded Morey grimly. "There'd be a rush like Dawson—yes, like the old Comstock in the States, if people knew what I know."

At the door, Kate pressed Bart's hand again. "You've given us new life. You don't know what you've done! I'll be there with Morey. He swears he won't marry me until he takes the gold from Rising Dog. But I'll be there, never you fear!"

Bart said, "Until spring, then!"

He had to leave them. He had to reorganize his thoughts. He took a last look at the glowing girl. He got away and walked through the town.

HE had given his life's savings to a man accused of murder by as reputable a person as Paul Cocteau. True, he banked on the girl, and he had set a lure to get the suspected man into Canadian territory. But it was fantastic, it was unbelievable. He thought of what inspector Winters would say to such harebrained behavior and winced inside his warm coat.

It was cold in the streets, where the noise of the gay life had not died with the late hour. A gust of bitter winter wind came down and bit at Bart. He was overwarm from being indoors near the fire and he gasped, turning his back abruptly to wrap his jacket even tighter.

His eye caught the movement which had been behind him before he made his move. A man was lunging with a knife, and there was something familiar in the gesture. It was the same gesture he had seen earlier, when Morey Sandell had been attacked. It was closer this time, and it could not miss its mark.

Another man came sliding in with the club Bart had also seen earlier. There was only one way to go, to the left. Bart slipped a little on the ice as he went in retreat, crab-wise. The knife sliced into his defending arm and he felt the pain and the blood streaming in his sleeve.

He got his back to the wall and kicked. His heel caught the knife-holder and sent him reeling back. The second man piled into the first. Bart came from the wall and struck with his sound right arm. The knife tinkled to the ground and a shot crackled in the air.

A hoarse voice said, "Damn the luck!" The two whirled and ran, for the second time that night. Footsteps approached and Blackie Smith's cheery voice called:

"I was keepin' watch on you. Constable. Them fellers are none of mine! I don't want a Mountie killed in my town."

The whiskered despot came close and said,

"Why you're hurt, man! Here, come with me!"

Blackie's villainy was always tempered with kindness—and shrewdness. There was a drunken doctor, nevertheless skilful. There was a room to rest in, to spend the night. Soapy read a lecture on walking the streets alone at night, but Bart could stand that, knowing he deserved it.

He had the knife in his belt. He had

grabbed it in the confusion of the attackers' retreat. It was a plain, ordinary hunting knife, of English manufacture. There were no distinguishing marks upon it, he found, except a nick at the end of the blade nearest the haft.

He stayed a day undercover in Blackie's retreat. Then he went out and strolled, in daylight, down to the scene of his affray, then on to the cabin where Kate Magruder lived.

The place was deserted. There were no signs of previous occupancy. Bart went on to Lulu's, made discreet enquiries. The girl, he ascertained, had disappeared, as had Morey Sandell.

Back at Blackie's, that worthy stated that the two men who had attacked Bart were also gone. "They come in a day behind you, now they've gone," said Blackie. "I wouldn't want to butt into your business, Constable, but maybe you got enemies in your own country. These hombres went over the White Pass, toward the Yukon. It's a tough time of year to mush thataway!"

Bart said, "Thanks, Blackie. There is a sapience about your rascality which almost appeals to me!"

Nevertheless he was glad to leave, bandaged arm and all. The place was lawless and he was the law.

He winced a little at the thought of Kate Magruder and Sandell and his money. But they would be on Rising Dog in the spring. He would bet his life on it.

He brought up short. He *had* staked his career on it. His job was to get the murderer of Holloway, the dead miner. Inspector Winters had put it on him. He would have to make some kind of report—and the case would be held open—a year, two years—so long as Bart was in service. But it would have to be finished some day—and Bart would have to finish it if it meant bringing in the man whom Kate Magruder loved!

There was a pang at that thought, too. Women, Bart had heard, were prone to love weak men. Sandell was not strong enough to hold his claim, not sturdy enough to stay away from whiskey in his despair. Yet Kate loved him. . . .

Then there was the puzzling business of the gold of Rising Dog. Jake and Toothy and Paul Cocteau had all said again and again that there was little of the metal in the Creek. Surely, Paul Cocteau was too smart to allow Heller and the others to pull wool over his eyes and hog any great amount of dust for themselves. Why—a rush to Rising Dog would make a millionaire of Paul almost overnight. He was on the ground, he owned the town to begin with.

There was something wrong. But Bart had bet on the girl. He could not have helped it, not to save his career—his life. In that warm cabin, with her heart in her eyes, the girl had cracked through Bart's skin.

Maybe he would regret it. Maybe it would be his finish, for Inspector Winters was flinty suspicious. But it was a thing done and not to worry over.

Bart could put it aside, fighting the winter over White Pass. Years in the frozen land had made him harder than the ice about him.

But he could be melted, he had learned!

III

THE storm had passed and a rising temperature galloped in its wake. The blazing sunshine beat down upon Bart Nelson's red coat, glanced off the wide brim of the stiff, black felt hat. There was a gentle breeze, heavy with moisture and laden with Arctic spring, and the world melted and dripped and Bart Nelson swore mightily at the chestnut horse who would not stand still for the saddle.

The broken, patched camp of the Dog-ribs lay quiet behind him. Bart's store of medicine was gone—there was no more to do for the dysentary-ridden *neches*. Seventy-five miles north lay Rising Dog, and it was past the time for Kate Magruder and Morey Sandell to have made the trek to resume their claim.

There was a raging impatience in Bart, but he had not been able to get loose. The Indians had been dying in droves, and he had been forced to make the camps until his remedies were exhausted. This was the last camp, and the last of the simple supplies.

What had happened at Rising Dog he

could only surmise. He hoped grimly that Kate had invested some of his money in good weapons and that she could stand off Jake and Toothy, who would certainly feel obligated to revenge their friend, Holloway. Bart had counted on being at hand himself when this crisis was imminent.

Of course, there was Paul Cocteau. Kate would be sure to appeal to the trader—Morey had seemed to think Paul was on his side, or at least that he was impartial. Morey believed Cocteau to be honorable, that was certain.

Bart frowned. The chestnut decided to stand, and the cinch buckle stuck. Everything went wrong, it seemed, everything conspired to keep Bart from Rising Dog. If he were as superstitious as the Indians he had been nursing, no doubt he would turn and flee southward. But that would only bring him back again to Inspector Winters, who was even now champing at the bit because in the case of Holloway, the miner, Bart Nelson had failed to get his man!

A lean, exhausted Dogrib broke from the camp and ran toward Bart just as he mounted the horse. The Indian said, "Redcoat take paper!" and collapsed upon his back, his chest heaving. Bart recognized him as one of the many who hung about the Rising Dog country and opened the stiff envelope with agitated fingers. It read:

"Constable Bart—We have your murderer, but he is ensconce with so beautiful lady and will not give up. I restrain Jake and Toothy. Come quick and get your man! . . . Paul."

Bart tucked the note carefully into his tunic pocket. The Indian arose and came close, staring up at him. He said, "My sister say come. My sister say good man who give presents is back and needs help."

Bart said, "Two sides to every story. Who is your sister?"

The man's eyes fell. "She stay by Cocteau."

"Oh!" said Bart, remembering the young squaw. "That one, eh? Thanks, Charlie. You get rest, then follow."

The Indian bowed with some dignity and wandered off wearily to the camp. Bart turned the chestnut horse's head northward and rode. He was a young man in a tremendous hurry, now. He could envision Kate Magruder — Kate Sandell?—standing guard on Rising Dog hill while Morey panned gold and Jake and Toothy lurked vengefully with rifles.

He rode hard through the woods, struck the trail and went up the Stewart. He branched off and took the overland route and camped that night in the woods. In the morning he put the chestnut over the hills and down into the familiar valley, and at noon the roof of Paul Cocteau's cabin was in view. He went faster, then, and rode up to the front entrance.

Paul came out, fatter and jollier than ever, his spiky mustache bristling with pleasure, his dark eyes dancing. He cried, "*Allons!* Food for an officer! Drink for the Redcoat!"

There were traders in the store, but Paul banished them, insisting that his friend the Constable should be entertained at once. He brought out the prized bottle and poured with reckless hand. He said, "You should see the beauty! The murderer's wife! They will hang him, no? Maybe she will return to Rising Dog, then!"

Bart said, "Tell me about it."

"Thees killer, he comes back in the night," said Paul. "Jake and Toothy spy them. They go up—and they are met with rifle shot, unfortunately near. They retreat, cursing."

Paul chuckled and Bart said, "So you went up?"

"Certainly! I go up. I talk to thees woman. She say they are staying to take out gold and we should please not bother, or she will shoot. She say she does not want trouble, no! But that her great friend comes soon and with him there will be trouble planty! I ask who is thees great one and she say he is fighter. I bet you she has got gunman from the coast coming here, no, Constable Bart?"

"How would I know?" said Bart. "You saw Sandell, the man you say killed Holloway?"

"I saw heem, and he must of killed Holloway," said Cocteau positively. "Jake and Toothy do not keel Holloway, no?

So eet must be thees Sandell. There is no one else here!"

Bart said, "Yes. Of course. However, it's strange he should come back, isn't it?"

"For the gold he theenks is here?" said Cocteau. "Any man comes anywheres for gold! It ees a curse!"

"Yes," nodded Bart. "A curse is right." He followed the stout trader into the dining cabin to the right of the main building. The young squaw served them. Her large, dark eyes were upon Cocteau fearfully most of the time, yet the Frenchman did not speak to her. Heaping platters of venison and precious potatoes were served. Cocteau did miracles, Bart knew, with his larder.

THEY ate. Cocteau prattled along of his trading, which was good, of Jake's and Toothy's mining, which was bad, he said. Bart said, "Where are those two galoots? I don't want them shooting my man, you know!"

"I have geev orders not!" said Cocteau. "I know the law of this countree, my frand. I know that to fool with the Mounted Police is suicide!" He was very serious for a moment.

Bart sighed, "Yes. You're quite right." He finished his plate, shoved back his chair. "Can you get Jake and Toothy down here? I want to go up on Rising Dog without them around. They are likely to get itchy trigger fingers, you know, in spite of your orders."

Cocteau despatched an Indian with a message. He talked on for an hour, and Bart noted finally that the pair of miners who followed the messenger back came from a totally different direction than the mines on Rising Dog.

They were sullen under Bart's eye. Jake said, "I'd oughter have gunned him, I tell ye. That gal's got no right shootin' at us. I coulda bushwhacked him at night, easy."

"Then I'd have taken you in," said Bart. "The man must have a trial, you know."

For a second Jake's eyes glittered venomously, then he turned away. Toothy seemed to have lost one of his prominent biting teeth, which interested Bart acutely. The two looked ready to kill, all right. They avoided looking at Cocteau and went off and sat down together on a fallen log.

The trader said, "You will go up now, eh?"

Bart said, "Directly. Go do your trading. The trappers and such won't be happy if you don't cheat them a little."

Cocteau laughed like a man with a clear conscience. "They trust Paul! Never you fear, I give them good treatment! You know me, Constable Bart!"

He rolled into the store and was affable with a hairy, dirty Canuck who had black foxes among his pelts. There was a fair amount of gold in the poke from which Cocteau paid the Canuck, Bart noted. But there was no tremendous sum.

An Indian came in, his wife following with his winter's catch. The woman did the bargaining, while the buck toyed with a gun too expensive for his lazy man's pile of skins. The woman snapped at Paul and pointed to a bolt of calico which screamed for attention.

Paul laughed and winked at Bart and offered another, dull pattern. The squaw shook her head vigorously, the buck turned and protested, the store was full of sound. Paul took his hand from the dull material and cut off the gay goods. He gave an extra yard to the woman, Bart saw, then made the Indian man a present of a cheap gun.

Yes, Paul dealt fairly with them. Thus he prospered, getting the traders from away out on the edges of the territory, some of whom would have had a hundred miles less trek to a nearer post. Shrewd, that was Paul.

Bart went outside, into the afternoon sun. He could see the spot upon the south flank of the dog's haunch where Kate had told him the claim was located. There was a spiral of smoke, thin and almost invisible, going up to the sky.

Jake and Toothy were glaring at the smoke. Paul came to the door, squinted, and said, "She cooks, *hein?*"

Jake and Toothy grunted. Bart walked leisurely to his horse, slipped the bridle into place. He said, "I don't want you following me. I don't want help. You understand?"

Jake's eye was baleful, but he under-

stood. Toothy spat through the gap in his fangs. Paul waved a hand and went inside to wait upon another customer. Bart swung into the saddle and started up the ravine.

IV

THE young Squaw was waiting just off the trail, hidden behind a bush. Bart dismounted and said, "All right. You can tell me now. No one can hear."

She was stony-faced with determination. She said, "You get message my brother take?"

"Yes," said Bart. "How was Holloway really killed?"

"Holloway on claim," said the woman swiftly. "Good man in woods, go toward claim. Jake, Toothy in woods, get good man, beat him, scare him. Holloway shot after good man leave that night."

Bart said, "Say it again, and more slowly. Cocteau was on a hunting trip. Jake, Toothy were hereabouts. Sandell was frightened off—*then* Holloway was shot."

"Yes," nodded the woman. "You know who?"

"No!" said Bart. "Do you know?"

The woman shook her head. "Me not know!" Her glance was steady enough. She undoubtedly believed she was telling the truth—and she certainly still believed Sandell to be innocent. Bart gave her a coin and said, "Say nothing. Wait."

She disappeared into the woods and he went on. He rode around the lower edge of Rising Dog, came back on the swing of the circle. He rode down into the ravine again and was in the camp without warning.

The claim was high and well-placed for defense, he saw at a glance: There was a bend in the stream and the other claims were all below Sandell's. He had located near the headwater of Rising Dog Creek, just past the bend.

The girl came out of the shack swiftly, the rifle raised, crying, "I warned you to stay off!" Then the gun lowered and she stared. She walked closer, peered under the brim of the wide hat. She said, "No! Not you! Not a Mounted Policeman!"

"Constable Bart Nelson," confessed he. "I didn't dare give you my right name last winter."

The cradle lay idle on the brink of the stream. There was no sign of Morey. There was little sign of work about the place. Bart said sharply, "What's wrong?"

The girl was thinner, paler. She said, "Morey—he's—sick. I—it was not easy for him."

"Where are the dogs?" demanded Bart.

"Gone. Sold to an Indian," said she, her face crimsoning. She looked behind her, at the cabin. Then she took Bart's arm and led him away, to a spot out of hearing. She said, "Morey's back on the bottle. He stayed off, he really did, and got into shape to make the trip. Then he—relapsed. I begged for him not to."

Bart said, "Are you married?" His heart turned over and his stomach went tight as he waited for the answer.

She whispered, "Yes. I insisted. I've made a mistake, Nelson. . . . Oh, it's Bart, isn't it? . . . That Frenchman, Cocteau. He said Morey was wanted for murder. Is it true, Bart? You're an officer. . . . Oh!"

She went whiter, and her mouth was a tortured ellipse. "You! You knew it, last winter! You're after him!"

Bart said, "Now, take it easy, Kate. I want to talk to Morey. I want to talk to you. What about the gold? Is it in the creek?"

She nodded, disinterestedly. "Oh, yes! Morey took out plenty the very first days, He has yours in a poke—your own poke. He's competent and honest—when he's sober. But the Indians get whiskey for him. They love him, somehow. The Dogribs are so pitiful, aren't they? They are weak, too."

Bart said, "Yes. The Indians are weak. I'll see Morey."

He arose. She looked up at him and said, "You're going to arrest him."

"No," said Bart slowly. "I'm not going to arrest him."

"But you've got to, if he's wanted!" she cried.

Bart shook his head. "We'll talk."

INSIDE him the pain was constant, now. He had not known what he really wanted, nor how a miracle would provide it, but

now he knew the age of miracles was past. Now he was a policeman, with a job to do, and the pain would become a dull ache after a while, and then maybe it would go away.

SHE almost stopped him at the door of the shack, then stepped aside with a gesture of resignation. It was painfully neat inside. There were two bunks. In one of them the fair head of Morey Sandell lay upon a rude pillow. His face was flushed and his jaw was lax and he breathed stertorously.

Kate picked up a cloth and soaked it in cold water. She applied it to Morey's head, and, after a moment, he opened his eyes and smiled dreamily at her. He said:

"You're so good to me, darling. Why don't you chuck it and go on back?"

She said, "Hush! Nelson's here!"

Morey turned, his pale eyes kindling. He said, "Well! A Mountie, eh? That Holloway business, I suppose." He was very calm. He seemed sober enough, except for a feverish glint which could have been amusement. "I didn't kill him, you know."

He stared again, brushed his hand over his eyes in a gesture Bart remembered. He sat up straight and his voice changed, was light again. "Oh, it's Nelson! Our friend! Get out that bottle, my dear. . . . Never mind, it's empty. Coffee, then. Coffee for our friend!"

He swung himself out of the bunk. He was shaky, but he managed to remain erect. He said, "Nelson! A bobby! How fascinating!"

Bart said, "You didn't kill Holloway? How did you know he was murdered, then?"

"Oh, simple," said Morey. "Cocteau told us. Fine fellow, Cocteau. He sends his Indians to see me. I love the poor Dogribs, you know. Simple, decent people!" He frowned and went on, "But there's a couple of those bullies I told you about. Heller and a character named Toothy. . . ."

"I know," said Bart. "The last night you were here—when they attacked you—was Holloway with the others?"

"Oh, yes!" said Morey. "Mean brute. Knew more about gold than the others. Wanted my digs very badly. It's rich, you know. I've your loan here." He took a can down from a shelf and tossed Bart's leather poke to him. It was heavy as lead. "A little interest—and you take halves of everything. Right, Katy?" He beamed upon his wife, who smiled at him.

She said in a low voice that Bart had never heard before,

"Yes, Morey. Take some coffee, please."

They sat at a rickety table and drank the scalding liquid. Morey rambled at times, and his face would go vague, but he always came back and was reasonable when Bart questioned him. He seemed strangely unafraid, now. There was something wrong inside him, but fear was not in it, Bart thought.

Bart's mind went back to the murder of Holloway. If Morey had not killed him, who had? Jake or Toothy, of course. No Indian would kill for gold. And Holloway had known more about gold than the others. . . .

Bart said, "Then Rising Dog is really a bonanza?"

"No end," said Morey carelessly. "I shall take a fortune out of it—presently." His pale eyes went to Kate, shrank away. He said candidly, "I've been unable to shake the demon rum. It seems to have got hold of me. I had hoped you would help, Nelson. Didn't know you were a Mountie, of course."

Bart said, "How could you? Will you tell me exactly what happened the night you were run off?"

Morey told him, sticking fairly close to the story. It was, with details, what the squaw had already told Bart. There was little left to do, Bart knew, except arrest the men down in the valley. He got up and said:

"Thank you. This will clean up my case. You'll come in and testify, of course."

Kate said, "Oh! Must he? Now?"

"I'll clean it up tonight," said Bart. "The Inspector is getting impatient."

"Then you'll be leaving at once?" she said. Her hands twisted a dish cloth made of an old flour sack. All the high confidence, the rosy spirits of Skagway had deserted her. Morey Sandell looked from one to the other of them.

Morey said, "She counted on you, too. It's really a shame, you know."

"Yes," said Bart. "A shame. None of my business, of course, Morey. But the whiskey you get up here will kill you."

He walked stiffly to where his horse was tethered. The pair behind him stood in the doorway, staring after. He mounted and rode down into the ravine, to where the gathering twilight descended about the cabins of that droll character, Paul Cocteau.

His small deceit had robbed them of their prop. It was spring on the Yukon, but there was another winter coming, and the weakness of Morey Sandell was now an established fact. A man could drink in the north—most did—but he had to be able to take it—or he would snuff out like a candle. Morey Sandell was the sort who could not take it.

The girl—what would become of her? Bart had his territory to cover, with Inspector Winters to see that he did it. He could not spend time looking after the girl. There was Paul Cocteau and his scarcely veiled references to Kate's beauty—and there would be others.

Bart rode down the trail, suddenly aware that his coming alone, without Morey Sandell, would be a tip-off to the men he wanted. It was too late to dissemble—the sharp eyes of the sourdoughs would have watched and spotted him by now.

He was mildly surprised, when he rode into the clearing, to see them through the window of Paul Cocteau's store, sitting on upturned boxes, sharing a bottle of liquor. Paul was leaning fat forearms on the counter, beaming. When he saw Bart was alone, he exclaimed:

"What? You do not get the killer? Did the woman run you off, too, my Constable?"

"Perhaps," said Bart dryly. "But the Mounties always get their man, don't they?"

V

THE four ate together, and the meal was a strange one. Paul Cocteau talked incessantly, drank quantities of wine. Jake and Toothy said never a word. Bart himself confined his remarks to yes and no when Cocteau demanded an answer.

They were not served by the handsome squaw. The substitute was clumsy, and Paul cursed her in French. Charlie, the good-looking squaw's brother, came into the trading post and looked briefly at Bart, then stole away.

Jake and Toothy were distinctly uncomfortable, but no mention was made of Holloway's murder, nor of the couple up on Rising Dog. It was as if everyone had agreed to let the matter drop. Bart's eyes were busy, but he kept his own counsel.

After dinner they sat around the huge store and Paul talked some more. He had stopped drinking, however, and soon got sleepy. He said good-night and rolled away to his cabin, admonishing the others to lock up.

Bart sat behind the stove, saying nothing. Toothy and Jake hesitated, lingered. Once or twice Toothy started to speak, but a glare from Jake silenced him. Bart sat tight.

The two finally left. It was close to midnight. Bart gave them time to seek their resting place, then closed the doors and the windows of the store. He put out all the lamps but one small one, which he placed on the floor behind the counter.

He scarcely knew where to start, but he was aware that Cocteau was clever. He put his hand upon the bolt of dull grey cloth which the squaw had spurned that afternoon and attempted to push it out of his way. The flat pieces of goods did not move under his shove.

He took hold of the end and hefted it. The cloth was as heavy as lead!

He dropped it on the floor in the light of the lamp. Carefully he unwound the grey stuff. In a short time he came upon a canvas lining to the material. He reached inside the open end of the pocket. The dust trickled through his fingers. The entire bolt was lined with gold!

He stood up. There would be others, of course. The richness of Rising Dog Creek was not such a secret! It was known not only to Morey Sandell!

His case was fairly sharp, now. He

would need the squaw who had been so informative. He would need Morey, sober. And—oh, yes! He would need the murderer!

He lifted the lamp and put it on the counter. He blew it out and stepped softly toward the door. It was best to get it over with now, before it slipped out of his grasp. He could get away from Rising Dog early in the morning and be far from Kate Magruder Sandell, leaving Morey to follow later, when the case came to court. . . .

He opened the door to step out. The gun went off almost in his face.

HE was conscious of shock, of being unable to draw his own weapon. His only thought was, "They don't dare kill a Mountie! They know they will be hunted forever, tracked down and killed like animals! They don't dare!"

But he was going down, down, and only by virtue of a great stubbornness and that firm belief in his red coat did he hang onto consciousness. He was aware that they grabbed him, lifted him, carried him back inside the store, placed him behind the counter alongside Cocteau's precious bale of goods. He was hit in the chest, he began to realize, with a heavy bullet, probably a .44. It was high, but he could die of it, he had no doubt. It was peculiar to think about dying. He shook his head to clear it and heard Jake Heller say:

"I dunno. They'll be quick after us!"

"We'll hide 'im," said Toothy. "Like we shoulda hid Holly, instead of makin' that bum play about Sandell!"

"Hide a Mountie? You're crazy!" said Jake. "I tell you it's nip and tuck. . . ."

"Frightened, my little pigeons?" asked a voice. "Such tender little pigeons." A short, wide form came and surveyed Bart as he lay weltering in blood. Paul Cocteau said, "It ees a shame, Constable Bart. I meant you to take Sandell and let me get away with my gold."

"You won't get far," said Bart calmly. He made an effort to arise, but the shock still held him helpless. He had been hit at close range.

"There ees a boat at Juneau Wharf," said Paul somberly. "My good frand Blackie—he's a provide for me. At a price, the peeg! By the time they find you—*pouf!* We are gone!"

"I'm a constable," said Bart faintly. The pain was beginning, now. His left hand fumbled at his belt, but they had taken his gun. His fingers still worked in the darkness, where Cocteau could not see. He got a button undone. He felt inside, and there seemed to be considerable blood.

But there was something more. There was the knife which he had held onto—his bit of evidence from the border settlement. His hand closed around the haft. He had to die, whatever came. He read that in Cocteau's certain, cocksure accents. Kate and Morey would die, too, for this trio never dared leave them behind to testify. And the Dog-ribs—the squaw had probably been put away before dinner. Charlie would be next, if they hadn't killed him already.

Wholesale murder! Paul Cocteau was saying reproachfully, "I had to keep it the secret that Rising Dog was reech, *hein?* That gold—that was for me, for Paul! I take eet back to *la belle Paree!* I weel be great man on the boulevard."

Bart's left index finger caressed the blade of the weapon under his tunic. He touched the nick down near the haft.

Jake and Toothy were getting impatient. Paul said, "Yes. You will take the Constable outside. Into the ravine. You will take beeg rocks and weight him good. Then you will sink heem, and it will be some time before he come up!"

"The freeze'll preserve him," muttered Jake.

"But we will be gone!" said Paul.

Bart moved a little! It was the devil's own effort and it hurt like hell, but he managed it. Toothy came around one end of the counter to take his head. Jake came around the other, at his feet. He gathered his knees up under him in a quick motion.

Jake, unsuspecting, leaned over. Toothy callously seized his injured shoulder. Bart lashed out with both feet.

Jake howled in pain and startled fear, his face streaming blood, cartwheeling backwards. Paul cried out in French. Bart got the knife out and slashed at Toothy's throat.

Toothy gurgled and fell forward, his hands clawing. Bart seized the gun from Toothy's belt with a great surge of hope. Jake, gun in hand now, was trying to get up, buried in a pile of skins.

Bart leveled the gun with great difficulty. His eyes blurred and he knew he would not have long to fight. He was weak still, and he was losing blood every second through the great hole in his shoulder. He pressed the trigger.

Jake leaped like a salmon on a line, struggled for a moment, was still. There was a shout. A door banged open. With superhuman effort, Bart grabbed the edge of the counter with the hand holding the gun and dragged himself upwards.

He stood there, swaying. In the doorway of the store stood Morey Sandell, smiling, pale-faced, a revolver in his hand — and behind him, Kate. Paul Cocteau was squinting along the barrel of a rifle aimed at Morey's heart.

Bart said, "Drop it, Paul!" But Morey was already firing, confusedly, the smile fixed on his face, his myopic eyes peering into the glare of the lamp, calling, "Bart Nelson! Are you there, Nelson?"

Cocteau reeled, then pumped the trigger of the rifle in a last blaze of frenzy. Bart drove a bullet through the Frenchman's bullet head. Cocteau dropped the rifle and plunged straight forward.

Bart tried to go forward, to get to the smiling, pale Englishman. Morey swayed against the wall, the revolver fell to his side. He said, "There you are, Nelson! I say, I'm a bad shot, eh? He got me!"

There was blood all over Morey's chest. Bart reeled a little, saying, "Lie down, man! Take it easy! You'll be all right. It was a brave thing, you know. A brave thing!"

He was half-conscious himself. He kept repeating it, "You saved me, you know. It was brave!"

Morey Sandell's smile broadened. He said delightedly, "Wasn't it? The first brave thing—I—ever—managed!"

He died there, while Bart watched in disbelief, died with a smile, on his feet, just leaning against the wall. That was all Bart remembered, then, except that it was a bad mess and he was going down into a dark well himself, what with one thing and another. . . .

INSPECTOR WINTERS said acridly, "You mean that squaw and Mrs. Sandell nursed you all that while?"

"Yes, sir," said Bart. "Cocteau was the murderer, sir. He and Heller and Toothy Grey could not possibly take up all the claims along the Creek, and if there was a boom they would be run over with sourdoughs. So they played it low and hogged it. Sandell was a smart engineer and found out about the gold. Holloway probably wanted more than his share or something and got into a fight with them and they killed him. The squaw will testify that Holloway was shot *after* Sandell left. . . ."

"Yes, yes. Very clever detective work, Constable Nelson. You're very anxious to clear Sandell's name, aren't you?"

"He gave his life for me, sir," said Bart. "Cocteau had me cold. . . ."

"Yes, yes," said the Inspector. "Nice work. Nice work. Now, there's an Eskimo up near Dawson who reputedly killed his woman and two others who tried to interfere. . . ."

"If you please, sir," said Bart. "I've applied for a leave."

"A leave? That wound is healed!" said the Inspector.

"But it's been granted from Headquarters, sir," said Bart. "Here is the order."

Winters groaned. "I can't spare you! It's ridiculous!" He stopped and re-read the order. "You're a sergeant, I see! Well, well!"

"Thank you, Inspector," said Bart. "I know you did it."

The hard face broke into a thousand wrinkles. Winters held out his hand. "Go to it, Sergeant!" he said.

He even followed Bart to the door, watched him get into the carriage. The horses trotted southward. The Inspector shook his head and muttered, "Lucky dog!"

Kate leaned against Bart's shoulder and said, "Morey was right in the end. I didn't make such a mistake, after all, did I, Bart?"

HIDDEN HERITAGE

By JOHN STARR

The luck of the outcast was all bad. So Dave Ross discovered. But a silent partner kept him on the right trail, and revealed secret justice.

THE whole team looked around and whimpered uneasily as Healey strode up. Pip, the lead dog, teetered and sidestepped nervously, tail tucked between his legs, eyes fixed on the swaying figure of his master.

Red Healey was ugly drunk. He knew that, and he glorified in the thought. He felt very brave and manly and dominant when he reached the ugly stage of intoxication. He swung his short, loaded dog-whip carelessly, flicking the snow piled high on either side of the path that ran along the town's one and only street.

Twice he slipped and almost fell, but at length he managed to reach the waiting team. Cursing, he threw himself on the sledge and growled at the dogs.

"Mush along, you cross-bred mongrels! Hi!"

Pip lunged forward with an eager, frightened whine, and the other four dogs scrambled after him. Their traces tightened suddenly, and the sledge, its runners frozen to the surface, started with a jerk that sent Healey rolling in the street.

"Ho!" he yelled angrily, getting to his feet and staggering toward the team, waving his whip until it whistled in the icy air. "Ho, there! I'll learn you to get funny! I'll skin you alive, you curs! Want to run, do you? I'll give you all the runnin' you want in a minute or two!"

The dogs all cowered in their traces as Healey came lumbering up—all except Telou. There was a look of dread in Telou's brown eyes, and he whined uneasily, but he did not crouch down abjectly in the snow as did the other dogs. He stood in his traces and waited for the punishment he knew from bitter experience awaited him.

"You again, is it?" growled Healey. "Stand up there'n grin at me, will you? That's the wolf in you!" Again and again he brought the cruel, frozen thongs of the lash down on Telou's head. Once or twice Telou yelped sharply in very agony, and his whole body quivered with the exquisite pain—but he would not grovel. "Get down on your belly!" thundered Healey, thoroughly aroused now. "Get down on your belly or I'll beat you down! I'll—"

He lapsed into mumbled obscenities, his whip arm rising and falling with merciless, mechanical regularity.

There was a sudden, hurried crisping of snow from behind, and Healey turned and glared sullenly, his whip dangling from his hand, smudging the snow where the bloody lash touched.

"Lo, Ross," he mumbled. "How they comin'?"

Dave Ross shot Healey a glance that was like a dash of cold water in the face.

"You got a grudge against that wheel dog of yours, Healey?" he snapped.

Healey was still ugly drunk. He stuck out his red-stubbled chin truculently.

"What's that to you?" he growled.

"Lots," said Ross curtly. "I've seen you beating up that dog several times lately, for no reason at all. I'll be hanged if you can do it again while I'm around!"

"You keep your nose outa my business!' snarled Healey. "Telou's my dog, and I do what I please with him. I'll whip him into strips if I want to!"

"The devil you will!" flared Ross. "He's game, that dog and, nosey or not, I'm not going to stand by and see you beat him just because you're drunk and ugly."

Healey's face grew purple.

"Oh, you ain't, eh?" he sneered. "What you goin' to do about it, you white-livered half-breed? Look here!" Turning, he swung the frozen, bloody lashes of the whip again, catching Telou across the muzzle.

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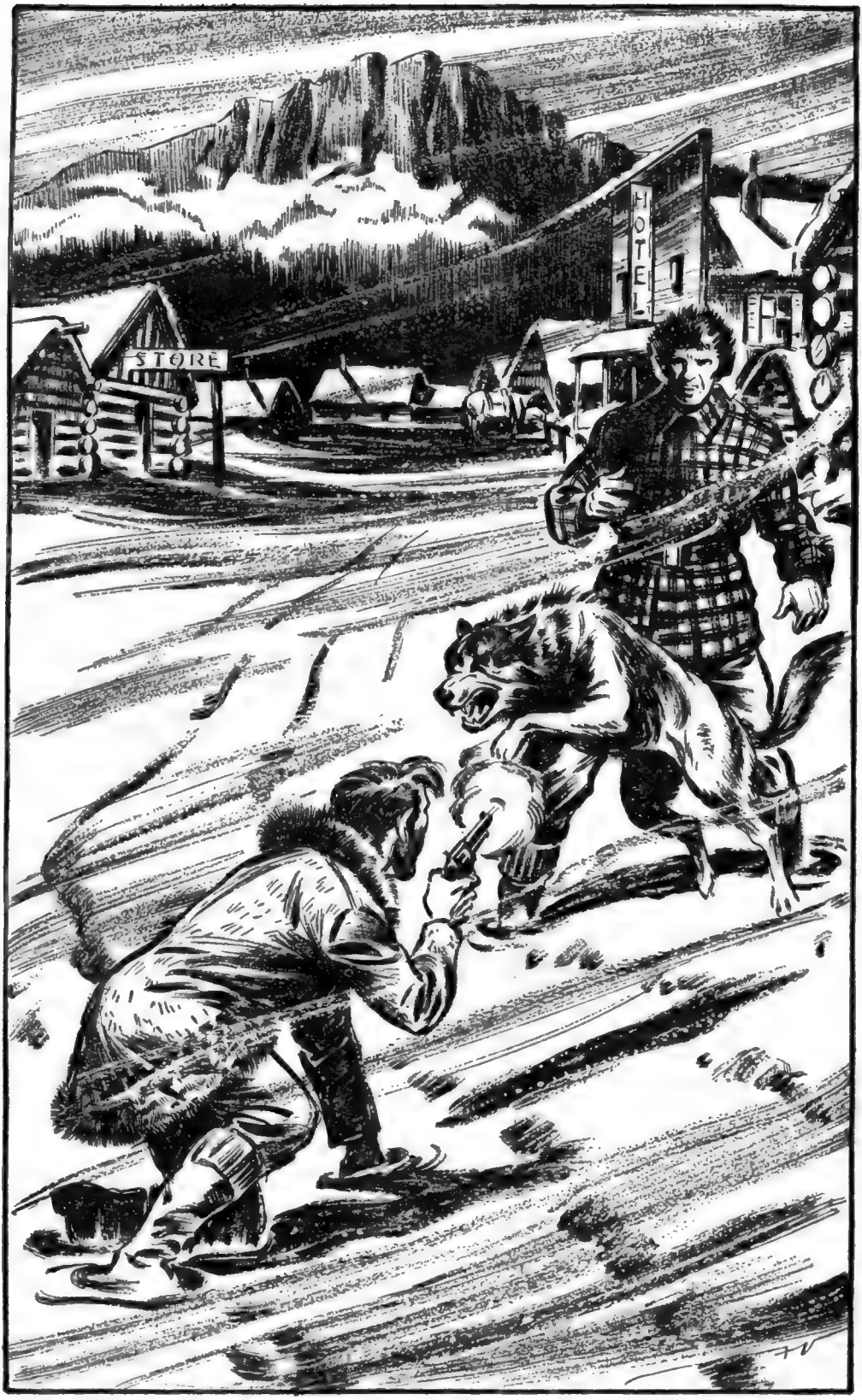

The gun roared, but Dave saw no flash of yellow flame at the muzzle.

"You want it, do you?" muttered Ross. "Very well, my friend!" He clipped Healey sharply with his left, and as Healey tried awkwardly to dodge the blow, he met Ross' right, swung with savage energy. Healey sighed gustily as his arms dropped to his sides. His head fell forward, and his knees sagged. His whole body slumped, and suddenly he crashed, face downward, in the packed snow of the street.

Ross looked around. Evidently no one had noticed the affair. Half the town was already in bed, and the other half was not venturing out into the sub-zero wind any more than was necessary. Ross yanked Healey's limp body onto the sledge with scant ceremony, and walked up to the wheel-dog that had been the object of Healey's drunken, unreasonable rage.

The dog looked up at Ross as he approached, an inquiring light in his great brown eyes.

Telou was not a handsome dog. He was half Airedale, and half timber wolf. His size and general build were the heritage of the wild blood in him, but his ridiculous, block-shaped head, his stubby tail, his ravelled, tangled brown coat, and his soft, understanding brown eyes, were the gift of his Airedale mother.

"Good boy," said Ross gently, cautiously putting forth a hand and stroking the rough, coarse hair of Telou's back. "Tough luck, old timer, tough luck!"

Telou looked up with unbelieving eyes. A great joy shone somewhere in their depths, as the sun shines at sunrise behind some great rolling cloud. He wagged his stub of a tail, and thrust his cold and bloody muzzle into Ross' hand.

"Tough luck, old timer, tough luck!" whispered Ross. "The luck of the 'breed, old boy. If you were all wolf, you'd be running free in the bush. If you were all Airedale, you'd be somebody's pal, outside. But you're a 'breed—*a 'breed!*" He repeated the word with a new fierceness in his whisper, as he softly and tenderly stroked the bloody muzzle with its cruel welts.

"A 'breed . . . like me!" he ended bitterly, and as though Telou understood and sympathized, he wagged his tail, and looked up again out of his great brown eyes.

Ross turned, the light of a sudden resolution in his eyes. Stooping, he shook Healey fiercely.

"What you want?" growled Healey after a time.

"I'm buying your wheel-dog — right now," said Ross curtly. "What's your price?"

THAT was the beginning of the strange attachment that sprang up between Ross and the dog, Telou. Ross didn't understand it, but there was something in the brute's great brown eyes that touched him. Ross told himself it was pity he felt for Telou, and a sort of fellow-feeling. And perhaps it was partially of these things that his love for the dog was compounded.

Ross was a 'breed, half English, half Cree. His father had been a free-trader. He had grown lonely in the bush, and had married a young Cree woman. She had been educated at a mission, and was both a wonderful wife and mother. Perhaps, if she had lived longer, things would have been different. As it was, she had died when Ross was a little boy of four, still small enough to be called "Davie."

If he had grown up in the bush, all might have been well with young Dave Ross. But instead, he had been sent "outside" for an education. His father had wanted to do what he could to make up for the mixture of blood that was in his son's veins.

It was while he was there that Ross learned what it meant to be a 'breed. He had learned to think of himself as white; he spoke as the whites did, thought as they did, dressed and acted as they did. He looked white, and the soul and the mind of him *were* white.

But—half the blood in him was Cree. He was a 'breed. And when he finally realized the fact, the iron entered Ross' soul, and it had never been withdrawn. His father had died when Dave was twenty, and since then Dave Ross had called no man friend. The Indians were coarse, ignorant, uncleanly. The 'breeds were, for the most part, worse than the Indians. And Dave was distrustful of the friendship white men had offered him. But Telou, with his mournful, worshiping brown eyes, had broken down the barriers

of Dave's reserve, and the two had become nearly inseparable.

Telou did not understand the kind treatment he received from Dave, but he gloried in it. His brown eyes grew fairly humid when Dave spoke to him, and he quivered ecstatically when Dave patted his head. Until Dave had taken him from Healey, Telou had never known the meaning of a kind word or a caress. Telou worshiped Dave as a god—a being sacred, infallible, un-understandable, to be adored with reverence and love.

DAVE leaned back more comfortably against the side of the camp, and leisurely filled and lit his pipe.

It was then that a moving shadow on the darkling bosom of the lake arrested his attention. It was too big for a swimming moose or deer, he decided immediately. It must, therefore, be a canoe.

"That'll be Jake McFarland," thought Dave, frowning. "Hang it, I wish he'd quit bothering me; I've told him twenty times I wouldn't join up with his gang!"

The canoe came steadily, rapidly closer, until it was obvious to Dave that his surmise had been correct. It was Jake McFarland, and he was clearly heading for Dave's camp.

"Hi, Dave!" shouted McFarland jovially as he beached his canoe. McFarland was a huge man, with gorilla-like chest and shoulders, and long dangling arms, muscled with steel cables. His voice was as large as the man, and he affected a hearty good-humor which was quite foreign to his real nature, as revealed by the crafty look in his too-small blue eyes.

"Jou'," returned Dave, nodding. "Have you eaten?"

"No," said McFarland, shaking his shaggy head ponderously. "But that'll come later, mebbe. I et late this noon, on Unikee portage." He came and squatted on the log close to Dave.

"Gimmee a load of that good Imperial of yourn," he suggested. "The other fellow's smoke always smells best—funny, ain't it? Thanks!" He filled his pipe, chuckling. When he lit the tobacco Dave noticed in the flare of the match how McFarland's huge cheeks flapped in and out as he drew on the pipe, and Dave was glad when his visitor finally had the tobacco glowing to his utter satisfaction.

"Well, Dave, I come to see if you ain't changed your mind yet," said McFarland, between smacking puffs. "We need you, that's straight, and we're willin' to give you a good split to make it worth your time. How about it?"

"Jake, I've told you enough times, I should think, to convince you that I'm not going to be party to any bootlegging scheme of yours. If you and that gang you trail around with want to make high wine and sell it, that's the police's business, not mine. But I'm not mixing in with anything of the sort myself. Now consider that a final answer, and let it go at that!"

Jake sloughed off his loose cloak of good nature on the instant.

"Don't get so high and mighty, now," he growled. "You ain't nothin' but a half-breed, and—"

"That'll do!" cut in Dave sharply, getting to his feet.

Just at that instant Telou growled and leaped between the two men. Jake took a quick step backward, and instinctively threw one arm before his throat. Jake was a bushman, and he had the bushman's wholesome respect for the savage dogs of the bush country. Harnessed, they are mere bundles of flesh to be flayed if the master pleases; free, they are the master's equal, if not his superior.

"Telou!" snapped Dave. "Get back, boy!"

Telou whined, but moved away, an ungainly, silent shadow in the gloom.

"I don't think he'd hurt you," Dave explained. "But he might. Thinks a lot of me."

"Savage brute! I'll pop him full of hot lead if he bothers me any," snarled Jake. "But what I want to know is, are you comin' with us or not?"

"No," replied Dave wearily. "How many more times shall I have to tell you that?"

"No more times!" roared McFarland angrily. "No more, by gravy! You'll come to me and ask for a chance—either that or you'll get outa the Lac Bleu country altogether. That's how hot we'll make it for you!"

He stamped down to his canoe, muttering, and as he flung himself into the

stern and shoved off, he flung back a parting shot.

"No low-down half-breed is goin' to put on the high and mighty with Jake McFarland — not and get by with it," he sneered. "Remember to say your prayers tonight—you're likely to be needin' 'em before long!"

Dave said nothing. He just stood there in the darkness and stared out into the warm, wind-swept blackness.

But the iron was turning in his soul, just the same. McFarland was white. McFarland—white. And Dave was a despised 'breed, that even a McFarland could sneer at.

Dave turned slowly toward the camp, and as he did so, out of nowhere, a cold, sympathetic muzzle was pressed into his palm.

"Telou! Telou, old timer!.. said Dave, and his voice was choked. *"Telou. . . ."*

FOR several days after Jake's visit Dave stayed close to his camp, brooding. He worked around the place, putting in a set of shelves he had long figured on, fixing the wobbly leg on one of the stools, refilling his bunk with balsam tips, making up new stretchers, repairing the roof.

He did not worry about McFarland's threats, although he knew that he would have trouble from that source. McFarland was a sort of un-official ringleader of a group of men who produced varying amounts of the deceitfully clear and limpid beverage known in bush country vernacular as "high wine." Their occupation is highly unpopular with the Provincial Police and with the red-coated Mounties — and, naturally, the producers of "high wine" are a rough-and-ready type. They are experts at causing accidents to happen—fatal accidents, that have a remarkable way of happening to those whom the "high winers" consider dangerous or undesirable.

Dave brooded simply because he was near the end of his rope. His morale was crumbling. The temptation was growing in him to "go native"—to throw off the garments, the thoughts, the habits, the ideas and the ideals, of white man's civilization, and sink back into the crude and primitive comfort of the Indian. His whole nature revolted against such a course, yet always before his mind, in mocking letters of fire, were the discouraging words:

"What's the use?"

It was around noon, the fourth day after Jake's visit, when another canoe came into sight. It swept close to the shore, but it did not land.

Abreast the camp, the lone occupant ceased paddling and called to Dave.

"How they comin', Dave?" asked the canoeist.

"So-so, Harry. Just so-so. What's the word from outside?"

"That's what I'm here to tell you about," explained the other, lighting a cigaret. "Henninger wants to see you. Says he's fixed it up O.K. Told me to tell you that and you'd understand. Get it?" He picked up his paddle, poised it, waiting.

"I sure do!" exclaimed Dave. "Mighty good news, Harry! Can't you stop while I pile some grub?"

"Thanks, but I'll have to be shovin' on. Want to get in before dark, and she's a long pull. S'long, Dave!"

He flirted his paddle in salutation, then dipped it deep. The light craft shot forward as though spurred, and in a few minutes the canoe was out of sight around the point, a faint trail of cigaret smoke hanging over the water.

Dave was frankly grinning as he started preparations for the midday meal.

So it had gone through! That was better luck than he had hoped for; indeed, he had thought the chance so thin that he had hardly given Henninger's promise a second thought.

Henninger was the district man for an organization competing with the Great Company. This rival organization was new, but it had both money and influence behind it, and was growing rapidly.

Dave had mentioned to Henninger that an ambitious man getting in on the ground floor would have a pretty good chance to get ahead with the new company, and Henninger had asked Dave if he would consider a job as factor.

"We're going to promote men in this outfit, Dave, and promote them rapidly. I don't know what's open now — don't know if there's anything, but we're open-

ing up new country all the time, and if you say the word—"

Dave had said the word, but with no particular belief or even hope that he would be given a chance. And now, out of a leaden sky of gloom, had shot this golden ray of hope.

He had a hard job dissuading himself from starting for town at once, but better judgment prevailed at last. It was just a stiff day's paddle from camp to town, and the day was more than half spent. No sense in putting in a night on the trail when it was unnecessary.

"But tomorrow," decided Dave," tomorrow we tear holes in the water getting there, Telou. Yes sir! And we'll show 'em a thing or two, won't we, no matter what man-forsaken post they give us? Eh, old timer?"

Telou looked up out of his soft brown eyes, worshipfully assenting. Yet there was in his eyes the look of unutterable sadness which never quite left them.

DAVE did "tear holes in the water" the next day, and the little canoe, with Telou perched proudly in the bow, his long, coarse brown hair blowing around his blocky, angular head like frayed ends of tarred string, made wonderful time. There was something more than just strong young muscle behind each powerful stroke of the paddle. There was tireless eagerness, and the twisted trail of bubbles in the canoe's wake lengthened ceaselessly.

Ahead Dave could see the broad expanse of the lake. On the other side, just a short distance now, was the town. Half an hour now, and—

A hail from the shore broke in upon his thoughts. Dave turned with a frown of annoyance; he knew that voice.

"*'Jou'!*" answered Dave perfunctorily, hoping to get by gracefully if he did not pause. But old John Twomen was not to be so lightly passed up.

"Come along John?" he invited, motioning for Dave to land. "*Bungee sakkasau,* eh?" he added insinuatingly.

Dave knew he could not afford to offend the old patriarchial chief. The Indians as a whole are friendly and honest, but when offended have numerous and cunning ways of showing their displeasure. Old John Twomen and his "tribe"—really only a group of his children, together with their mates and their offspring—trapped over territory not far from Dave's.

It was good policy not to offend the graceless, begging old duffer. Dave landed and proferred his tobacco pouch, that John might take the "little bit of tobacco" which he had asked for.

John grinned toothlessly, his face the exact color of an apple exposed on the tree all winter.

"*Shekatains?*" he asked shamelessly when he had crammed his huge pipe full of Dave's tobacco.

Dave accepted his tobacco pouch and passed the old Indian a number of matches. "Anything else?" he asked, good naturedly.

"My girl, my 'Nette, she like you come say hello," nodded John, his shrewd old eyes disappearing in a remarkable network of wrinkles. "She think you—"

"I know, John—you bet. But right now, must hurry. When I come back, I stop again—maybe—and then—"

Dave stopped helplessly. He always felt helpless around Annette. She came tripping down the little path that led back to the camp, her lips parted in welcome, her eyes warm and gently reproachful.

Annette was pretty. Many Indian girls are pretty—but not for many years. Annette was only seventeen.

"Dave!" she called prettily. "Did you stop to see me—or just to pass the time of day with Dad?"

"Er—both!" said Dave rather uncertainly, for he was not a good liar. He was thinking what a contrast was here—a girl speaking good English, educated in a convent, but clothed, as he could see now as she emerged from the concealing undergrowth, in a man's blue denim shirt, a frayed skirt of some mouse-colored, sadly soiled material, and a bright red scarf around her waist. Her brown, slim legs were innocent of hose, but she wore flat and rather shapeless moccasins of white moosehide, carelessly ornamented with a few dyed porcupine quills.

Old John's toothless grin widened.

"You come talk us both, eh? Well, you talk to John already." He chuckled hoarsely. "Now John let you talk to 'Nette!" and with a deliberate, but barely perceptible, drooping of the withered lid of his still keen right eye, the wily old savage

nodded and strolled off down the shore and out of sight.

ANNETTE sprawled herself across a flat-topped ledge and gazed up impudently at Dave. They had taught Annette to speak good English at the convent, nothing more than that. Inside she was Indian.

"Still afraid of me, Dave?" she asked, her big, dark eyes inviting.

"No," said Dave gravely, shaking his head.

That was not quite the truth, however. He *was* afraid of Annette. She was much too pretty for any man's piece of mind.

"For, if you are—there's no need, Dave," said Annette softly.

Dave looked down at her. What a strange creature she was! He knew she loved him, and the thought aroused a sudden tumult in him when he dwelt upon it. He knew that he had but to speak to win her.

Hurriedly, Dave turned away.

"I'll stop as I go back, Annette," he explained hastily. "Got some important business in town."

"With Mr. Henninger?" asked Annette.

Dave turned and looked at her, his eyes questioning.

"Yes. How did you guess it?"

"I didn't guess; I knew," replied Annette lazily. "He told me you'd probably be coming by, and for me to head you off, if I saw you. I guess he didn't want the job of telling you himself."

"Telling me—what?" asked Dave after a moment of ghastly silence. It seemed to him that his voice came from miles away, and that the world stood still while he awaited the girl's reply.

"The job of telling you," said Annette, and her eyes were bright with triumph, "that he got word at the last minute from headquarters that they couldn't find a place for you. Or for any other—half-breeds."

The world started on then. It whirled angrily; it dipped and twisted confusingly. Dave heard himself speaking again.

"You . . . are . . . sure?" said his voice from miles away

"Sure, Dave." The girl was on her feet now, coming closer and closer, her eyes luminous, her arms half stretched out to him. Her lips, Dave noted dully, quivered like a leaf in the wind.

"Dave!" she said. "Forget all that! Come—come with me; we could be happy together, you and I! They don't want you—there in town. Not the people you like. There is no place for you there—no place—for a 'breed. And I—I love you, Dave. *Dave!*"

Slowly Dave raised his arms, held them out toward the girl. After all, what was the use? What was the use—of anything?

But at that instant Telou barked, sharply—warningly, it seemed to Dave. He straightened up, turned once more to the canoe.

"Later, Annette," he muttered dully, and left her staring after him with eyes filled first with anger and then with tears.

The bow of the canoe Dave kept headed for the town, and in the bow, gravely regarding his master, sat Telou, his shapeless ears flapping around his ungainly head.

THE first man Dave met was Henninger. He was just coming out of the company's store in Lac Bleu as Dave passed by.

"'Lo, Dave," nodded Henninger uncomfortably. He was a big man, although not tall, with a big, square face, now rather flushed with discomfiture. "I—I've got some bad news for you."

"I know." There was no emotion in Dave's voice, and he stared by Henninger unseeingly. "Annette told me."

"I'm sorry, Dave," said Henninger. "Damnably sorry! It's a dirty shame. You'd be as good a man as we could get anywhere. The company could use you. But back at headquarters they don't understand. They—well, you understand, Dave."

"Yes," nodded Dave dully. "I understand. It's not your fault; I know that. See you later," and Dave strode on down the street, Telou at his heels.

Yes, he understood, Dave told himself bitterly—only too well. He was a 'breed. Nothing could alter that. So what was the use fighting the fact? Why continue to butt his head against an unyielding stone wall? Why kick against the pricks? Why—

"Why not take Annette and settle down in the bush and be what I am—a 'breed?" he muttered. "Why not throw in with McFarland and his outfit? They'd be glad to have me, even now. There'd be easy money, and plenty of it—and nobody would

be surprised to see a 'breed mixed up in the high wine business. They expect such things from us!"

He knew where he could find McFarland. He would be down at the Royal Hotel, taking orders. McFarland was a sort of contact man for the crew of high winers. He would be there, all right, and he would be glad to see Dave come to him —just as he had said Dave would come.

A man staggered out of the hotel just as Dave came up. Dave knew the man. It was Red Healey.

"Who the 'ell you shovin'?" growled Healey, stopping and glaring through the dusk. "Oh, it's you, is it?" he added, thrusting his be-stubbled face close to Dave's. "You yellow half-breed! What you mean shovin' a white man off the walk?"

"Keep your shirt on, Healey," advised Dave curtly, in no mood for bandying words. "You're drunk, or I'd ram your words down your throat for you!"

"You would, eh?" roared Healey, balancing himself on his heels. "You would, eh? Well, lissen, now," and he spewed forth a string of epithets that no man, drunk or sober, can hurl at another without having a fight on his hands.

Quick as a flash of light Dave swung. His knuckles crashed on Red's chin, and Healey went down like a felled ox.

"You made a mistake, Red?" he asked quietly. "You didn't mean what you said just now?"

Healey, mouthing obscenity and profanity, tried to get to his feet, but the alcohol and the blow had deprived him of his legs. Aroused by the sounds of the fight, a curious crowd poured out of the hotel, cursing good-naturedly, and chattering questions as to what it was all about.

Dave looked up for a moment, and some one in the crowd shouted an excited warning. Dave glanced down at Red and saw in his hand something that flashed in the yellow light that poured from the open door of the hotel. *A gun!*

Healey, his face working with maniacal rage, half raised himself, his eyes flaming with triumph. Dave made a desperate effort to kick the gun from Healey's hand, but knew with sickening certainty that he was too late.

THE gun roared, but Dave saw no flash of yellow flame at the muzzle. Instead, he had a momentary impression of a hurtling body, with a ludicrous head in which eyes shone green with hate.

A sharp yelp of almost human agony, a roared oath from Healey, an excited chattering as the crowd closed in. Dave was aware of these things—aware that some one snatched the gun from Healey's hand before he could fire again. Yet his eyes were fixed not upon his cursing enemy, but upon the shaggy brown body that twitched at his feet.

"Telou!" cried Dave. *"Telou!"* He stooped over the writhing body of the dog, and an odd trembling seized him. Through a blurring mist he looked down into the dimming brown eyes.

"Don't, old timer!" he whispered, stroking the shaggy, misshapen head.

Telou looked up into the face of his god, the old look of adoration there—a look also of pride and satisfaction and utter contentment. Feebly he licked Dave's hand, and then the pitifully ludicrous head fell back, and Dave knew that Telou was dead.

"There was something for you to do, after all, Telou," he whispered. "There is—a place—for all of us—somewhere. . . ."

Somebody led Healey away. Dave noted that dully, noted also that in the silent circle was McFarland.

But Dave did not turn to McFarland, the man he had come to the hotel to see. He knew now that he could not do what he had planned.

Telou had taught him the simple lesson. One waited, and in time there came the chance to be of service—to show the stuff of which one was made—to show that a 'breed can be as fine as one of unmixed blood.

With a sob that caught painfully in his throat, Dave stooped and gathered up the body of his friend.

The silent, watching circle opened to let him pass, and without a word or a glance, Dave strode down the street, through the gloom toward where his canoe awaited.

There were hot, stinging tears in his eyes, but his head was high. For understanding had come to Dave Ross, and for the first time in many years his soul and his mind were at peace.

WHITEWATER AMBUSH

By EVAN SLYTER

A Novelet of Timber Empire

THE proprietor of the crossroads store a few miles northeast of Armstrong Creek looked speculatively at the two hard-looking customers who were consuming canned goods and crackers over the soft drink counter at the back of the long building. He rubbed his chin and leaned over toward the taller and better-

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Three men dashed into the open. Bullets sang over the plunging raft.

looking of the two hearty trenchermen.

"So you're kinda scoutin' around for a job, eh?"

"Yessir, that's what I am," replied Ananias Jones cheerfully. "This here sawed-off chunk of horsemeat what I met up with yesterday says he's after the same thing." Jones jerked his thick thumb toward John Johnson.

"Any old job's what I want," said Johnson. "And, mister, don't let this here horse thief what I'm with make you think I ain't respectable. He was walking in the same direction as me and I had to be polite." Johnnyhaha screwed his expansive, good-natured countenance into a frown at Jones.

"Looks like you two don't love each other none to speak of," remarked the storekeeper.

Jones held up his fork impressively. "You said a couple mouthfuls, brother. Any old job is what I want too, but I ain't staking anything on dragging this feller longside of me. That bald-headed pirate sticks to me like a burr to a horse's tail. Any chances for jobs around here?"

The display of enmity between Ananias and Johnnyhaha was the result of Jones' coaching. Ananias believed that two friends could be of more help to each other by appearing to be enemies. This belief was but the extension of the theory that the less strangers knew about a man the less harm they could do to him. Ananias held this theory with consistency, for he seldom told the truth about himself. In the life of a wandering laborer there was much to give backing to a belief of this sort, for one was constantly running up against strangers about whom one could know little.

Since leaving Long Lake four days before, Jones had impressed upon Johnnyhaha the necessity for keeping his hand hidden until he knew what cards were being held by the other fellow. Johnson had proved an apt pupil.

"Well-l," remarked the storekeeper rubbing his chin with more energy than before, "I think maybe you could pick up a job from Webb—Spider Webb we call him hereabouts. He sorta needs men to help him drive his logs down the creek to the siding. He'll be in with some of his friends to play poker tonight. Stick around and see what he kin give yuh."

There was something in the storekeeper's eye that Jones didn't like. He was concealing something that had to do with this new job, but Ananias couldn't understand what there could be to conceal.

"Is it a pretty fair job?" asked Johnson.

"Well-l, yes. I'd say it was pretty fair. 'Pends on what you call a fair job, I guess."

The storekeeper went to the front of the building to wait on a customer. Jones spoke in a low tone to Johnnyhaha.

"That feller's holding something under his hat. Let's stick around and find out what's it all about."

Johnson nodded his shiny bald head. "Any old job," he remarked.

SHORTLY after eight that evening men from the neighborhood came straggling into the store, where a pool table and several card tables provided entertainment. One of the first arrivals caught Jones' attention at once. He was a great hulk of a man, standing well over six feet. He was broad-shouldered and a little inclined to stoutness. His garb was that of a woodsman, but not of the common jack. He seated himself at the largest table and gestured a companion into a chair.

Jones saw that the big man was not young. His hair was growing gray around the temples where it had once been a light brown; his eyes were large and so lightly tinged with blue that they seemed almost white—around them were deep wrinkles; the nose was large; a bushy gray mustache hid the mouth. The pale eyes picked out the two strangers at once.

He beckoned to Johnson.

"Bumming?" he asked in a pleasant baritone.

Johnson pulled off his cap and rubbed his bald pate.

"You might call it that. Job-hunting."

"The other fellow your partner?"

"Nope. He's just a bum I ran across the other day."

"Hmmm!" The big fellow fingered a pack of cards. "Want a job, eh? Play poker?"

"Play at it," confessed Johnson, cheerfully.

"Sit in."

Johnnyhaha sat down. "I can't play for very high stakes," he began. "I—"

"It's all right. I'll stake you. Tonight you come with me to my camp. I need a good man and you look like you could stand the racket all right. My name's Gehrig—Fred Gehrig."

"Mine's Johnson."

"Glad to meet you, Johnson. Hey, you!" Gehrig addressed Jones.

"Me?" asked Ananias, who had watched the hiring of Johnson with interest.

"You. Looking for a job?"

Ananias strolled over.

"Yessir, Gehrig, I shouldn't wonder but what I might take a job if everything looked all right. My name's Jones, Elmer Jones of the Langlade County Joneses. Glad to meet you. Yessir."

"Had any experience in the woods, you two?"

"Ten years," said Johnson.

"Experience!" Jones waved a deprecating hand. "Why, man, if there's anybody in these parts that knows any more about logging I'll eat him, bones and all. I've even logged cactus off the Sonora Desert. Yessir, if you want an experienced feller, I'm it."

Gehrig looked at Jones with new interest. He saw a pair of frank, steady brown eyes, a lock of rich yellow hair falling over a high, broad forehead, and regular features that fairly exuded truth and innocence. Gehrig's mustache moved into what was meant to be a smile.

"You don't look old enough to have had much experience. Logging cactus, now—how and why was that done?"

"Well, sir," said Ananias, "the cutting was done same as we cut trees. Giant cactus it was. The trunks was dried and used for paper pulp. Being soft like it made good tissue paper. But the spines on the outside was the main thing."

Jones sat down at the table and began playing with the cards. Gehrig wanted to know what the spines were used for.

"It was kind of a secret," answered Jones. "You see, our boss figgered on using them spines to make a medicine what would cure spine trouble. It's reasonable, ain't it?"

Gehrig's pale eyes darkened with sudden chagrin.

"Why, you—you—" He got no further, for at that moment the door burst open and two men stamped in. "Spider!" murmured Gehrig to his companion. "I hope I have better luck tonight."

JONES turned at the word, *Spider,* expecting to see a formidable man. Instead he saw a pale, tiny man whose eyes were shielded behind huge glasses. Unquestionably this was Webb, for the storekeeper greeted him with effusiveness and several loungers called him by name.

Webb came directly to Gehrig's table after responding to greetings with a careless nod. He tapped Gehrig on the shoulder as he slid into a chair.

"A pleasant evening, Gehrig. Shall we begin?" The voice was high-pitched and precise and the words were accompanied by a sarcastic smile.

"All set, Webb. Meet two of my new men. Johnson and Jones."

Spider shifted the lenses of his huge glasses and Jones looked into a pair of violet eyes that were magnified to more than normal size by the thick glasses. While Webb acknowledged his pleasure Ananias framed the one descriptive word —*ladylike.* Spider was small—not over five and a half feet—he was slender, white-skinned, and pretty. In skirts he might have passed for a good-looking maiden. Ananias was vaguely disappointed.

"Two new men, eh?" remarked the ladylike fellow. "Do you expect to run your logs through, Gehrig?"

"I do. The river is a public highway."

Webb's dainty lips parted to show small even teeth. "I am using that highway just now, my friend. Do these new men expect to play with us?"

Gehrig nodded. Webb nodded toward the front of the building.

"We'll need another chair. Polly is sitting in. Here he is now."

The door opened and a veritable mountain of a man entered. He was as broad as Johnnyhaha and fully six and a half feet in height. His dark skin, straight black hair, and black eyes told of his Indian blood. Without a word he came straight to the table and looked for a chair. Jones offered his. The giant nodded briefly and sat down.

"Polly, meet Johnson and Jones," said Webb. "Polly, gentlemen, is my private

secretary. Get something to sit on, Jones and we'll begin."

Ananias saw that all the chairs were occupied. He approached what he thought was an empty barrel, but which turned out to be an unopened barrel of salt. Jones looked around, saw nothing else that would suit his purpose, and then picked up the barrel. He put it down beside the table and seated himself. Several of the loungers in the room whistled softly to indicate their admiration.

"That barrel empty?" asked Webb.

"Full of salt," replied Ananias. "Let's go."

"Hmmm!" breathed Webb. "All right, I'll deal."

THE long, slender fingers of Webb shuffled and manipulated the cards with the dexterity that Jones had long associated with the sharper. The cut and the deal, however, were certainly honest. Moreover, not once during the evening did anything shady occur. The game itself was a sociable affair with moderate stakes, but it was played as only artists at poker can play. Obviously every man in the game was playing for the sheer pleasure of playing well against opponents who knew every detail of the technique.

It was a little after ten when the game broke up. Webb spoke to Jones and Johnson.

"Do you fellows know what you're running into when you plan to work for Gehrig?"

"No. And I ain't particular," replied Johnson. Jones nodded his agreement.

"Well, boys, it's like this," said Webb. "I am running my logs down the creek five miles and it will take me at least three weeks to finish. Gehrig, here, is up-river from me and wants to run through to a landing below mine. He refuses to wait till I'm through. Under the circumstances I am informing him that he can't get through to his landing until I finish. I intend to see that he doesn't."

"That isn't all," said Gehrig heatedly. "This man could easily compromise and let me make my run at the same time, but he wants to force me to sell my stuff to him at his figure. If he holds me up for three or four weeks he knows that I'll lose several thousand dollars. It's sharp business, and it's as dirty as hell. I'm going to fight for my rights. If you boys want to quit now's your chance."

"Don't misunderstand Gehrig, my friends," said Webb with a prim smile. "There isn't going to be any enmity between us or anything of the sort. In a way it's just a sporting proposition. I'm betting Gehrig that I can stop him from going through. Well, I'll stop him all right, but it will be just a sporting fight, you know. A little disagreement between friends. Gehrig and I, you understand, are brother-in-laws, and a family quarrel like this would never be really serious."

"Oh, of course not," agreed Gehrig. "For the sake of my dear sister, his wife, I couldn't think of making the trouble serious. A little fighting over a sporting proposition, that's all this is."

"Yessir, this suits me from the ground up," said Jones. "A nice little fight now and then is just so much food for me. Gimme three or four men to lick now and then and I'm happy. But, Mr. Webb, you wanta be sure that none of your men tackle me alone. I get careless sometimes and break a feller's neck kinda absent-minded.

"Now, you see," he went on, stepping quickly to Webb's side and grasping the little man by the collar of his mackinaw, "I take a feller like this"—Jones lifted Webb off the floor with one hand—"shake 'em, and . . . Oh no! You don't pull that on me!"

The last was caused by the appearance of a small automatic in Webb's hand. Jones took the gun away with a grin. Webb forced a smile.

"I beg pardon. You may give it back now."

"Sure, never lose your temper, Webb."

Ananias handed back the weapon. He felt a heavy hand on his shoulder and looked up into the dark eyes of him they call Polly.

"YOU are a bright young man, Jones," said the giant. "I advise you to get out of the country or I'll break *your* neck."

Jones cast a swift glance around him. Gehrig, he saw, was pale under his tan; the onlookers were tense with excitement; Johnson was just behind Polly. The Swede's merry blue eyes were twinkling

and he put out a foot suggestively. Jones grinned up at Polly.

"Listen, Parrot. You take your hand off my shoulder pronto or there'll be one less giant for Jack to kill. Get me!"

The black eyes above him flashed with amusement. Jones shoved suddenly. Polly staggered and went over Johnson's foot. He measured his great length on the floor. Johnnyhaha was beside him in a moment. The Swede's short arm, which possessed the general features of a granite pillar, reached out swiftly and grasped the giant's wrist. A short struggle ensued and then the giant forced a smile over lips that were pushing back a howl of pain. Johnson's powerful hand had locked over Polly's wrist and the fingers were embedded deep in the flesh between the cords.

"Let go, please," said Polly. "I don't wish to brawl here."

Ananias pushed Johnson away just as the Swede's booming laugh rumbled through the room.

"That's what I say!" shouted Jones. "What's the idea of you butting in, you baldheaded sun-fish! Just because we're hired by the same boss don't mean you got a license to horn in where you ain't wanted. Now take the barrel back and let decent people alone."

Johnson meekly picked up the heavy barrel of salt and carried it to the grocery counter. He placed it on the counter without apparent effort and went to a corner, chuckling to himself. Polly rose to his feet.

"Now, Spider Webb," said Jones with a broad grin, "seeing's how this is a sporting proposition I've got fifty dollars that says we get Gehrig's logs through whether you try to stop him or not. Put 'em up. The storekeeper can hold the stakes."

Webb's eyes snapped behind their shields. "With pleasure, my cocky friend. Here's my fifty."

"Just one thing more, Webby," said Ananias handing over his money, "Tell this long-geared smoke-house here to keep out of my way and warn your gang to look out for me. When I get going I make a steam-roller look like a baby's rattle. I used to rope wild elephants over in India just for the fun of it. And if you ever get in my way I'll shake your eye-teeth out."

"We'll see," said Webb and beckoning to Polly he left the store.

"My God!" said Gehrig, dropping weakly into a chair. "You've sure raised the devil now. Don't you know that Webb is dangerous?"

"He ain't half as dangerous as I am. Long's we're going to have war, Gehrig, the quicker we start the better."

ON the way to camp that night, Gehrig explained that he had around a million feet of logs that were to be floated down stream to the St. Paul Line spur north of Athelstane. Across country the distance was about seven miles; by river it was at least twelve. During the thaw—it was now the middle of March—the river was high enough to permit driving without difficulty over most of the distance. Webb's camp was two miles nearer the railroad and therefore between Gehrig's camp and the siding. Moreover, Webb was taking his logs out of the river at a part of the siding that was fully a mile nearer the camps than was Gehrig's destination.

Had Webb been willing to compromise, both loggers could have driven their logs down during the same period. While Webb was decking his logs Gehrig could have been driving his. By working in shifts and doing a little night work the two crews could have gone along without interfering with each other at all. This Webb would not agree to. He had offered to buy Gehrig's logs at a figure considerably below market and when Gehrig refused he had decided to hog the river until he had completed his own driving.

Since Gehrig would need to hold his crew on the payroll whether they were idle or not, it was obvious that Spider was actuated by spite, though Gehrig assured Jones and Johnson that it was really merely a sporting proposition. As he put it, the whole affair was a little test of strength—a friendly brother-in-law against brother-in-law affair. His manner, however, was agitated. It required very little acuteness to see that not all the cards were on the table.

At the breakfast table the next morning, Jones and Johnson were made acquainted with the twenty-five members of the crew. Gehrig's lieutenant, the real boss of the

camp, was a lanky, sandy-haired man, perhaps around forty years old. He was of average size though slender; his manner was nervous. His blue eyes had a worried expression. He answered to the name of Hakey. The men over whose destinies he had some influence were an average lot of lumberjacks, of all ages, descriptions and nationalities.

In the office after breakfast Hakey questioned his new men.

"I'm worried about this business," he said in a low, confidential tone. "Spider is a mean customer to deal with and he's got thirty-five men, most of 'em pretty tough. This here bein' a woods boss is a little out of my line. I'm a cow-puncher by trade and now I know I shoulda stuck at it while my health was good. Driftin' is what done it. Never had sense enough to know when I was well off."

Hakey sighed deeply. "You know," he said with the air of one imparting a deep secret, "I'm a coward, that's what I am, when I ain't got no hoss atween my legs. I'm plumb scared, that's all."

"What you scared of?" asked Ananias.

"Well, most anythin' I'd say. I don't hanker for to push up no daisies nor I don't like the insides of hosepittels. Me, now, I like peace and quiet—lots of it. What you recekon we ought to do first?"

He addressed the question to Jones.

"Drive down the logs. That's what we got to do, ain't it?"

"Yeah, I reckon that's what is what. Gosh! Ain't it terrible to get into messes like this! You fellers brave?"

"Sure," said Johnson, his tremendous face wreathed in smiles. "I never get scared. How's it feel?"

"Awful," groaned Hakey. "You brave too, Jones?"

"Yessir, I'm braver'n Johnson by a long ways."

"Haha-a! That's a good one," rumbled Johnnyhaha. "Remember that wolf?"

"Aw—" began Ananias, but Hakey cut him off.

"Must be great not to be scared. When'll we start drivin'?"

"Why not right way?" asked Jones. Hakey rose reluctantly.

"Aw, well, if I gotta I gotta. That's what I always say. I'll order the boys out. Come on."

JOHNSON and Jones, now that they could appear friendly without exposing themselves to the imaginary dangers raised by the lively imagination of Ananias, stuck together while the boss mustered his forces. Gehrig made the suggestion that enough logs be spilled into the river to make a five hour run and that a boom be stretched across the river just above Webb's camp. The water was quiet for a distance of over three miles. By holding the logs in readiness they could be shoved past Webb's landing at night. After that it was necessary to get by the boom at Webb's portion of the siding.

"You mean if we can get near where Webb pulls his logs outa the river we can block him from shootin' logs down in back of us. Then he'll have to let us through with our first batch. That it?" said Hakey.

"Exactly," replied Gehrig.

"It's goin' to be awful," remarked Hakey disconsolately. "Sure as shootin', them ornery hombres down there'll beat us all up. Well, get busy. Jones, you and Johnson come with me to stretch that boom across above Webb's. Mr. Gehrig, if you'll get things ready up here we'll do our end as fast as we can."

At the landing the men selected six large cedar logs for the boom. With rail spikes and bits of chain the alternate ends were securely bound together and the whole made into a raft with rope. Jones, Johnson, and Hakey, equipped with axes, pikes, peavies, and two chains, pushed off and were soon gliding downstream at the river's leisurely pace.

The sun by this time had climbed above the trees and made the placid stream sparkle with jewels wherever the light breeze rippled the surface. The temperature was well above the freezing point, but the little tang in the air made the veins quicken with life.

Ananias, using his long pike to guide the raft, stood near the rear of the clumsy craft and sang about the death of Cock Robin. Johnson kneeled on his discarded mackinaw and balanced his pike across his knee, in preparation for any obstacles that might lie in the path. Where his memory served him well enough he joined in Jones' song, his rumbling bass causing the pussy-willows to vibrate on the bank.

Hakey sat moodily on his haunches like a despondent coyote from the home ranches. If anything his cheerful companions seemed to depress him.

The numerous meanderings of this part of the stream made the distance to Webb's landing over three miles while the sluggishness of the current made progress slow. It took the raft forty-five minutes to bring its burden within hailing distance of the enemy camp.

At Hakey's request, Jones and Johnson curbed their buoyant spirits. It would never do, the ex-cowboy explained, to let the Webb forces know what was up.

The raft was brought to rest at a convenient bend in the stream and the work of fastening the boom was begun. The end log on one side was made secure by chaining it to the bole of a large swamp birch. While Johnson and Jones poled the remainder of the raft across the river, which at that point was about thirty feet wide, Hakey disappeared into the willows in search of possible spies. Carefully loosing each log as they crossed the stream the two friends soon had their work completed.

They sat down to wait for Hakey.

WHERE the cowboy had disappeared the river bank was steep. A gravel shelf some ten feet in height flanked the fringing willows. After a fifteen minutes wait Jones saw Hakey's hat lift itself cautiously over the edge of the bank from the woods beyond. Soon the boss's head appeared.

Jones waved a hand, but relapsed into immobility at a warning gesture from Hakey. The two friends saw their boss crawl along the bank until he was directly above a clump of willows. He edged himself into position and sprang into the bushes. The next moment there was a muffled shout and some startled whoofing. The clump of willows became the scene of a violent struggle. Before Jones and Johnson could gather themselves to go to their partner's aid, the foreman rose above the willows in a graceful arc and landed in the icy river, about three feet from shore. The next moment a lumbering black shape sped over an open space along the bank and disappeared into the forest. Hakey had jumped upon a black bear out foraging for food after its winter's sleep.

The foreman's face was pale as he waded ashore and joined his two assistants.

"M-y s-soul and g-grandmother's a-aunt!" he chattered, agitated by both fear and cold. "I-I reckoned on ju-jumping one of We-Webb's men and landed on a b-bear as b-big as a house! I-I'm scared stiff!"

Johnson was sitting on the end of the boom. He heard Hakey's explanation, gave the foreman one look, and let out a delightful roar that tipped him backwards into the water. This was fortunate because the icy river effectually shut off any more laughter that might have led men from Webb's camp to the boom. Jones, laughing under his breath, pulled Johnson to safety and warned him to be quiet. Hakey looked sadder than he had at any time since breakfast.

"It's a bad s-start, that's what it is," wailed Hakey. "B-bad l-luck is goin' to h-hound us all the ti-time. What'll we do now, J-Jones? I'm goin' to catch my d-death of c-cold."

Jones fought back his amusement and managed to control his voice. "You and Johnson go back and start the drive. If you run you'll keep warm. I'll stay here and guard the boom."

"A-all right. Come on, Jo-Johnson."

Hakey loped away up stream followed by the short-legged Swede, who was hard put to it to keep up.

"Huh," chuckled Ananias as he watched the runners, "if that cowboy's a coward I'm a grasshopper's hind leg. I bet the bear was twice as scared as he was."

AFTER ten minutes of watchful waiting Ananias got tired of communing with his pipe and decided to do a little scouting. It was strange that there were no sounds of activity down at Webb's camp. Ananias believed firmly that the best way to handle trouble was to go out and look for it. He climbed the bank and went downstream, taking care to remain in the cover of the woods.

It was now nine o'clock and the morning sun was becoming warm. In the forest the snow was becoming a mass of slush that penetrated Jones' hob-nailed leather boots—provided by Gehrig for river work

—and soaked him to the knees. Sick of that sort of discomfort, Jones threw aside all caution and took the open logging road, where the ground was bare and fairly dry.

Ahead of him lay Webb's landing where huge piles of logs waited to be rolled into the river and sent down to the railroad siding. There was no sign of activity. Evidently Webb had sent his crew to the end of the drive, either to load cars or to pull logs from the river. Ananias took a chance and walked boldly around the piles of logs. He cursed with anger when he saw that Webb had filled at least a hundred feet of the stream with logs—merely to block any move on the part of Gehrig.

Encouraged by lack of opposition, Jones directed his steps to the camp, situated on a hill some two hundred yards back from the river. That Webb did business on a large scale was indicated by the number and quality of the buildings, which were made of good lumber and painted red. There were eight of the structures all told, four on each side of a short street. Ananias, seeing no one outside, went to the cook's kingdom or queendom, the largest building of the lot.

At the large range near the rear of the long room stood a buxum, good-looking matron. Though she was past middle age her flushed, round face was as unlined as that of a young girl. She turned a pair of frank blue eyes upon Jones and greeted him kindly.

"I'm Elmer Jones from Gehrig's camp," explained Ananias. "I just came over to visit."

The cook wiped her hands on her apron and came forward.

"I'm Mrs. Schmidt. Ain't you afraid to come over here by us?"

"Naw. Why should I be?"

"Well, it's a shame that two relatives should all the time be fighting by each other, but Webb and Gehrig they ain't friendly."

"Nobody's jumped on me yet. Right off I says to myself when I see you that here's a woman with brains and good looks and if anybody could put me right on this mess she's the one. I'm kinda helping out Hakey."

"Ach, there's a nice man," said Mrs. Schmidt, warming to Jones' compliments. "Only he's awful bashful. You didn't meet nobody because they're by the siding." Mrs. Schmidt dropped into a chair and leaned forward. "I tell you, Mr. Jones, Webb is mad by Gehrig on account he got most of the inheritance."

"What inheritance?" asked Jones, not quite certain who got it.

"Why, Gehrig's papa's. The old man he died last year and he left most of his property to Gehrig and leaves not much to the sister, Mrs. Webb. Ooh, I tell you there's a woman what is reg'lar devil yet. She jumps on her husband and her husband jumps on Gehrig so he can get some of the money—only it ain't money exactly on account it is timber all standing. Right away they had a trial in the courts about it, but Webb didn't get no more anyway and now he wants Gehrig should come through and help him out. That's how it is. Is Mr. Hakey feeling all right?"

Mrs. Schmidt's face flushed a little more deeply with this question. Ananias saw a light.

"Sure, sure, he's fine. He says to me this morning that if I ever went down toward Webb's I should say hello to you for him. He can't fool me. He's sweet on you. You ought to hear all the nice things he says about you."

"Ach, I bet you're fooling," said Mrs. Schmidt, her beaming face indicating that Jones had hit the right track. "Since my husband died I never seen such a bashful feller as Mr. Hakey. Why don't he tell me them things, I wonder?"

"Give him time. Some fellers are awful backward that way, Mrs. Schmidt. You gotta help 'em out a little."

"Yah. But some again ain't so bashful. That I know." And the widow's eyes flashed over some unpleasant memories.

"When'll the crew get back?" asked Jones.

"When it is nearly dinner time. It is not so far, so they come here and eat. The bull-cook he will be back pretty soon."

"What kind of a feller is this Webb?"

"He is a spider like they call him. Mr. Hakey he says they should call him a tarantula instead of a spider. But he pays good wages so I should worry what kind of feller he is."

"Who's the big Indian he's got helping him?"

Mrs. Schmidt smiled. "Ach, he is only a little Indian. Mostly he is Finnish. Those Finns never know when to quit growing. But Mr. Polly is a nice feller only he owes Webb a lot for sending him to school and such. He is only a young feller yet and I hope he don't get spoiled hanging around with the boss."

Jones rose. "Well, I don't want to be keeping you away from your work, Mrs. Schmidt. You oughta come up and visit us some time. Hakey'd be mighty tickled." Mrs. Schmidt permitted herself to giggle just a bit. "Will this crew be working down to the siding this afternoon too?" asked Jones from the door.

Mrs. Schmidt nodded vigorously.

"Sure. All day. Then tomorrow they start driving again. Tell Mr. Hakey hello."

"I sure will. S'long."

FINDING that there was no need for hurry, Ananias set himself to the task of inspecting Webb's camp. He went from building to building, noting with admiration that everything was clean and in excellent order. There were twenty-five bunks in each of the men's buildings. All but fifteen showed signs of having been occupied the night before. The office was fitted out with the best of furniture and two beds. If Webb was nothing else he was at least careful of the crew's welfare.

The large stable was the last building that Jones inspected. He was about to leave it when a shadow loomed in the doorway and Polly appeared. Jones and he saw each other at the same time. Polly smiled grimly.

"How do you do, Jones," he said. "To what do we owe this visit?"

"I was just curious to see what you fellers were doing," replied Ananias. "You got a nice camp here."

Polly's smile broadened.

"That we have, old man. I'm glad you like it because I've decided that you're going to stay with us a few days."

"Yeah?" Jones raised his eyebrows and grinned. "When'd you turn generous like that?"

"The moment I saw you," said the giant easily. "Judging by your performance over at the store last night I should say that you were too good a man to be roaming around. Will you come to the storehouse with me and be locked up peaceably or will you force me to be rough?"

"Well, now, Polly, that's what I calls a good question. Seeing as my boss is getting a dirty deal and I hate dirty deals I figger I won't be staying at all. Think you're big enough to stop me?"

The behemoth frowned.

"I'll grant the dirty deal part, Jones. I don't like Webb's methods myself. But I'm hired by him. I think I'm big enough to stop you."

"Suits me. All this being a sporting proposition I'll make you one. We'll fight to see who is the best man. If I lose I stay here, if you lose you come along with me and stay until tonight at Gehrig's. You're coming anyway, but this way I won't have to carry you less'n I cripple you too much. I'll be careful about that. Is it a go?"

The giant smiled reflectively. "Well," he said at last, "that seems fair enough. I don't like to hurt you, but if you will be stubborn it's your own fault."

"All right with me. Let's fight outside where there's plenty of room."

Polly nodded politely and led the way to an area of packed earth. He removed his coat and emptied his pockets. He threw a knife and revolver on top of his coat. Jones followed suit, producing no weapon more dangerous than a jack-knife.

"Catch as catch-can?" asked Polly, smiling down upon Jones.

"Suits me. All set?"

Polly replied by rushing in and swinging viciously. Jones ducked and drove his right into the giant's mid-riff. A loud grunt announced that the blow was effective. Polly danced back and said between set teeth:

"No wonder you could handle that barrel of salt so easily. I see this is going to be interesting."

Ananias laughed shortly and made a fake dash toward Polly. He stopped just as the giant's foot came up for a kick. Jones grasped the swinging leg and jerked the giant from his feet. At the same instant he drove his right fist forward into Polly's jaw. Polly hit the ground with a jar, but managed to clinch before another blow could be struck.

THE big Finn was a powerful man; that Ananias discovered shortly. However, Polly was both young and inexperienced and Jones was a veteran of many a woods fight. Moreover, size does not necessarily make for superior strength. The struggle on the ground was vicious. Polly thought to crush Jones' resistance in a bear hug, but failed. Ananias tensed his chest muscles and gripped the giant under the arms. Slowly, while his opponent strained his big arms in vain, Jones sunk his thumbs into Polly's arm-pits. A few moments of this torture convinced Polly of his wrong choice of tactics. With an explosive groan he struggled to free himself and finally succeeded. The two men rolled free and leaped to their feet.

Polly now fought on the defensive, using his great reach and his heavy boots to keep Ananias at a distance. Jones danced out of range and searched for an opening. Time and again the Finn's great fists landed glancing blows. The force of them led Ananias to the conviction that a direct hit would be the end of the scrap so far as he was concerned.

"Afraid?" sneered Polly between set teeth.

Jones threw back his head and laughed aloud, keeping a wary eye on his opponent. The ruse worked. Polly rushed forward and Jones dropped to his heels. He straightened his legs when inside Polly's flailing fists. His upper-cut caught the giant squarely on the chin and the lifting power of Jones' legs threw the Finn flat on his back. Ananias stood over him and waited, but Polly was done. He gasped once or twice and then rolled over on his face.

Jones spent the next fifteen minutes bringing Polly back to something near normal. At the end of that time the giant sat up and shook his head.

"Where were you when the accident happened, Jones?" he asked with a smile. Jones laughed, and held out his hand.

"Shake, Polly, you're all man. Come on now. Let's get out of this before your gang gets back."

Polly obeyed without a question. As the two passed the cook's house, the giant raised his hand and stopped.

"Just a minute, Jones. To help you I'll tell the cook not to expect me for dinner. She'll tell Webb and no one will suspect anything."

Jones heard Polly make his explanations as he had promised. Then the two set out for Gehrig's camp.

"Do you know, Jones," said Polly, "I believe that I'll have to learn something about fighting. In the past all I had to do to win an argument was to look threatening. You don't scare very easy, do you?"

"Nope, not me," replied Ananias lightly. "I got over being scared of fighting when I was a husband-finder in Hollywood where they get lost awful easy. A feller had to be brave when he held up one of them husbands in front of his wife after bringing 'em home."

BY the time Ananias and Polly reached camp the first batch of logs had been sent down the quiet river to the first boom. Gehrig was delighted with the news that Jones brought and promptly ordered that enough logs be dumped into the water to make a full day's run. The plans provided for releasing the boom immediately after dinner and sending the timber to a second boom just above Webb's siding. This would involve breaking Webb's blockade at his landing and forcing him to let the run go through.

Polly insisted upon being bound to a chair in Gehrig's office during the afternoon. Though he had given his word to remain, he wanted to be able to tell his employer truthfully that he had been forcibly detained. Webb, it appeared, did not understand the finer points of honor, but he could understand force.

Hakey detailed Ananias and Johnson to the duty of opening the blockade at Webb's camp. At Jones' insistence the ex-cowboy included himself in the party. Immediately after dinner the three set out. Their task included the building and anchoring of a new boom to be placed across the river just above Webb's second blockade at the end of his run.

"Hakey," said Jones while the three men were on the road, "I met a friend of yours this morning. Her name is Mrs. Schmidt."

Hakey's blue eyes lost their worried expression for a moment. He smiled uncertainly and avoided Jones's glance.

"Yeah? She's a nice gal, ain't she?"

"Oh, so-so," said Ananias. "She says to me, 'Say, do you know that handsome bozo that runs the camp up at Gehrig's?' Right off I knew she was talking about you and I tells her that I knew you and that you had a wife and seventeen kids in one town and another wife and five kids in another place."

"My soul and grandmother's aunt!" yelled Hakey dismayed. "You didn't go and tell her that!"

"Sure. The way I figgered it, you was in danger of getting caught in one of these suicide pacts in front of a minister so I thought I'd help you out. I told her you was a reg'lar devil with the women and she tells me that's just what she thought from the way you made eyes at her all the time."

"You dirty coyote, Jones," said Hakey with more sadness than anger. "Now you went and spoiled it all. If I had a hoss atween my legs now I'd commit murder, I would. I been figgerin' to pop the question ever since Christmas, only I never had the nerve. I'm a coward with the women; I get plumb scared when I hear skirts."

Ananias was apologetic. "Danged if I ain't sorry, Hakey. I never thought for a minute that you liked Mrs. Schmidt. I thought I was helping you out. But it ain't too late yet. While Johnnyhaha and me loosen Webb's boom and make a new one you go over and fix it up with the widow."

The trio had reached the first of Webb's log-piles by this time. Hakey rubbed his hands together agitatedly.

"I wish I was brave. Do you think she'd listen to me, Jones?"

Ananias soothed the worried man.

"Sure, sure. She thinks you're a devil with the women and that'll make her like you. Go on. You gotta do it to save your reputation."

"If I only had a hoss atween my legs!" Hakey said wistfully. "I'm always braver when I'm on a hoss. Well, if I gotta I gotta." He started off, but stopped. "What if there's a bunch of Webb's men around?"

"Pound hell out of 'em," said Jones.

Hakey scratched his sandy head. "Oh, all right. Get busy, you two."

THE moment that Hakey was out of ear-shot Johnson laughed softly. "If he only had a horse! Haha-a! That's a good one!"

"Come on, come on!" said Ananias. "We got work to do. Anyway, a wife'll do that feller a lot more good than a horse. And if I know anything about women Hakey ain't going to be single long."

Apparently Webb didn't expect his brother-in-law to take immediate steps, for he had again left his blockade unguarded. By working rapidly Jones and Johnson had cleared away the obstructing logs left by Webb and had appropriated enough logs for a new boom. Without waiting for Hakey's return the two set off downstream on their new raft. By three o'clock they had finished the job. An hour later the van of Gehrig's run had bumped gently against the new boom and the first skirmish was won.

Though they had worked within ear-shot of Webb's siding, Jones and Johnson had not been discovered. The tameness of the supposed conflict between Gehrig and Webb apaprently disappointed Johnnyhaha, for when the time came to go home he refused to go further than Webb's camp. Jones tried to persuade him to get back to Gehrig's for supper, but Johnson shook his head and with a grin pulled a lunch out of his pocket.

"I'm going to stay around here and see the fun when those men get back from the siding. Besides, I want to get me a couple of prisoners. If you could bring back Polly I can bring back a couple of other men. They got ten more in the crew than we have and we gotta even things up."

Ananias hesitated and then shrugged his shoulders. "All right. I'm too hungry to hang around. If you ain't back to camp before ten o'clock Hakey and I'll come down for the remains."

Johnson's only reply was a booming laugh.

As soon as Jones was out of sight Johnson crawled into a space at the end of one of the log-piles. From his retreat he was able to get a view of both the landing and the camp while he was effectually concealed from view.

He had not long to wait. Before sunset

he heard the laughter and voices of Webb's men coming to supper. Several stragglers came out of the logging road at the landing and stopped in astonishment. Logs, bobbing idly in the gentle current of the river, filled the stream in both directions. The discovery caused excited shouting. From the camp men came running, among them the boss.

Webb gave one glance at the river and then began cursing shrilly, his little body fairly jumping with wrath.

"Gehrig never had the nerve to do that alone!" he screamed. "It's those new men. Wait till I get my hands on that Jones!"

At that moment Polly came strolling up.

"Well, what are we going to do about it, Webb?" he asked quietly.

The little man's answer gurgled in his throat. Then—

"Do about it? Do! I'll—I'll! You big fool! Where were you when this was being done! Didn't I tell you to keep an eye on things up here!"

"I've spent a pleasant afternoon at Gehrig's camp—tied to a chair," responded Polly. "This Jones that you're making idle threats against knocked me cold and held me prisoner.

"I knew it! I'm going to kill that man on sight!" shrieked Webb. "The insolent dog!" He turned fiercely upon Polly. "And you, you big hulking idiot, you let yourself be whipped by one man!"

"Careful, Webb," warned Polly. "I am not paid to eat your insults. Jones licked me in a fair fight. Moreover, there's going to be no killing if I can prevent it. You're trying to play dirt and I'm willing to take orders up to a certain limit. But I want you to know that I think you're being a filthy little rat."

Webb's hand went swiftly to his coat, but Polly's hand was quicker. The giant took the automatic away and shook his boss angrily.

"One more break like that, Webb, and I'll snap your neck. If you value your life don't do that again! Here's your pop-gun!" The giant's voice was icy and contemptuous. "Now," he went on, "the only thing we can do is to let this run through and clear the river for ourselves. We can set guard against another surprise and prevent Gehrig from sending down more until after we've completed our work."

After some discussion Polly's decision was approved. The men went to their camp.

JOHNSON waited nntil the dusk had thickened enough to hide his movements. The chill air of the March night made the cramped position between the logs very uncomfortable. As soon as the buildings of Webb's camp had become shrouded in the veil of late twilight, Johnson made his way toward them. He took to the woods in the rear of the large dining hall and crept to a window. Inside, the long tables were lined with men. Certain that there was no one to watch him, Johnnyhaha succumbed to his great weakness—the playing of practical jokes.

Cautiously he entered the sleeping rooms of the men and wrought havoc with clothing, tobacco boxes, and bunks. He tied up sleeves and trouser-legs, knotted socks, and sprinkled tobacco in between blankets. Then he took the clothes-line and strung them in front of the doors. By the time he had hurried through his pranks complete darkness had come. He stepped outside and to the rear of one of the buildings just as the first of the men came from their supper.

Johnson listened for the first few tumbles and curses and ran, chuckling to himself, to the stable. There were only three teams remaining in camp, for cross-hauling. These Johnson led outside and turned loose. Next he went to the tool-house and secured a coil of rope. He hurriedly cut off a few lengths and shoved them into his pocket. The rest, about twenty feet, he stretched across the space between the office and the tool-housee.

In the darkness beside the rope he sat down and ate his lunch, laughing occasionally at the fervid curses that came in increasing volume from the bunk-rooms.

Having satisfied his hunger, Johnnyhaha was ready for action. He went back into the woods and brought forward several large balls of wet snow, which he packed into balls and piled up at the edge of the forest. He removed his coat and began target practice, aiming his missiles at the bunk-house doors. The thumps on

the doors soon brought men to them. Johnson laid down a barrage and managed to bring forth numerous howls of pain.

"It's Gehrig's bunch!" yelled one man.

"Where are they?" asked another. Johnson leaped to the back of his rope barrier and broke a dead limb over his knee. The sound brought results.

"Over there." "Let's get 'em!" Varying cries brought men on a gallop toward the trap. Johnson retreated to the woods and waited. The unsuspecting crew struck the firmly secured ropes and went down in a pile. Those who brought up the rear thought a fight was in progress and piled on their comrades. Johnson pelted the squirming, shouting mass with snowballs until he was out of ammunition. Then he advanced and proceeded to muss up any person who came within reach.

Yells of "I got one!" "Leggo, you fool, it's me!" "Up at 'em, boys!" filled the air. The luckless crew, hopelessly befuddled by the darkness, the snowballs which had struck them, and Johnson's raids on their number, fought savagely among themselves.

For a while they were heedless.

One by one, however, the battered men began to withdraw and take stock. Johnson remembered that he wanted prisoners. He grabbed one of the men nearest him, clapped a heavy hand over his mouth, and dragged him into the woods. He bound and gagged his victim and went back for another. Before the battered men had come to a realization of the trick that had been played upon them Johnnyhaha had four prisoners lying in a neat row in the woods. While the discomfited warriors returned to their houses, Johnson tried to figure out how he was to bring his prizes to Gehrig's. A stumble over a discarded whiskey bottle gave him an idea.

"I've got you boys covered," he said in a hoarse voice, "and I'm a pretty hard guy. I'm going to loosen your legs and you walk ahead of me to Gehrig's camp. The first man that makes a false move will get plugged."

He shoved the mouth of the bottle against the neeck of each man in turn. He unloosened the bonds that held the ankles of his prisoners and used the rope to tie them all together. The march homeward was without incident.

JOHNNYHAHA arrived in camp with his prisoners before nine that evening. He herded them into the bunkroom and exhibited them proudly.

"You're a piker, Jones," he said, rubbing his shiny poll with obvious satisfaction. "You bring in one prisoner and I bring in four. Haha-a!"

Gehrig and Ananias hastily took the bonds from the prisoners, who looked with mingled chagrin and curiosity at the squat, broad figure of their captor.

"What in the world did you do this for, Johnson?" asked Gehrig.

"They're prisoners of war," said Johnson. "There's thirty-five men in Webb's camp and only twenty-seven here. We gotta even things up."

"But good Lord man!" objected Gehrig. "We can't be pulling off tricks like this. We'll have the law on us."

"Well, Polly tried to take Ananias prisoner, didn't he?" asked Johnson. "What is fair on one side is fair on the other."

"What else did you do down at Webb's?" asked Jones suspiciously.

Johnnyhaha's round face was wreathed in smiles. Laughing heartily at intervals he listed his escapades. Gehrig was half amused, half irritated. Jones shook his head.

"It's a cinch you've stirred up a hornet's nest now, Johnnyhaha. Gehrig, we'll have to get out before daylight and start those logs or Webb'll cook up a lot of trouble just for revenge."

Jones turned to the four "prisoners." "Listen, you fellers, do you know what Webb's going to pull next?"

The resentment of the captives had been partially dissipated during Johnson's explanation. One of them grinned.

"I tell you, boys," he explained, "none of us down at camp is very fond of the boss and we know he's playing dirt, but we're hired by him and gotta obey orders. From what we heard you're going to have your hands full putting your logs through, but we don't know just what Webb's got up his sleeve. He's got about ten rough-necks in camp that do his dirty work for him and get paid for it, but that's all we know. What'll we do? Stay here and tell the boss later we was taken prisoners?"

Gehrig scratched his head. "I don't

want to get mixed up with the law. I guess you better go back."

"After all my work?" asked Johnson in disappointment. "The laws are all busted now. Why don't you hire 'em instead of Webb?"

"Sure," said the spokesman of the captives. "We'll quit Webb in the morning and fight for you if you hire us. We ain't crazy about dirty deals."

"Done!" said Gehrig. "Draw your time in the morning and join us. I can use about six more of you if you can bring them along."

"We'll bring 'em. None of the decent jacks care much about Spider only he hired us first. We'll be here before dinner tomorrow."

Johnson watched his prisoners file out into the night and rubbed his bald head. "Well, anyway, Jones," he said, "I got four to your one."

Ananias laughed. "You're all there, Johnnyhaha. But now we gotta get ready for an early start. You can bet your neck Webb ain't going to waste time."

AN hour before dawn the next morning the crew had finished breakfast and was on its way to work. Half of them had been detailed to watching the run for stray logs along the banks; the other half, under the leadership of Hakey and Jones, were to take charge of the advance through the stretch of rapids below Webb's siding. The swift water was new territory and promised to raise some difficulties. There was but a short stretch of it, to be sure, but a jam would cause no end of trouble.

Hakey was less glum than usual. His interview wth the widow Schmidt had resulted favorably. Hakey was now an engaged man and his self-confidence had measurably increased as a result of his success in love. Man-like, he took all the credit unto himself and failed completely to see that it was Mrs. Schmidt who had engineered the conversation and brought about the new state of affairs. Hakey, if the truth were known, had been pretty much an innocent bystander, but he had been led to believe that only his cleverness had overcome the widow's reluctance. However that may be, the foreman had taken a new grip on his courage and directed his men with vigor and confidence.

"Jones and Johnson and me," he said when his half of the crew had reached the boom holding back the logs, "will go ahead and clear the rips. The rest of you stay here and start the run as soon as it's full daylight. By that time we ought to have the river blocked where we take the logs out of the water. Now get busy and stick a raft together for us."

Working with the aid of the light from a lantern the crew picked out three of the largest cedar logs near the restraining boom and lashed them together. By the time they had finished, the first rosy streaks of dawn were painting the eastern sky. Hakey directed Jones and Johnson to get on the raft with their tools while he kept up with them on the bank.

"Now in a half hour," said the foreman just before he left, "I want you to let loose about a hundred feet of these logs here and three of you experienced drivers ride 'em through the rips. If we miss anything that little run will strike it and we'll be sure to keep from makin' too big a jam. Let 'er go, Jones."

The raft was shoved off, struck the mid-current of the river, and drifted slowly past the loosened boom at Webb's siding. Hakey's slightly bowed legs carried him forward along the bank at a more rapid speed than that of the raft. In a few minutes the foreman was out of sight in the morning mist. In the growing light the river was a gray thread from which rose curling tendrils of fog. Jones, guiding the raft with his pike-pole from the rear, bade Johnson to watch for sunken logs and masses of brush. For a half mile the sluggish current went its wandering way through the level, cleared acres along the railroad. Though Gehrig's siding was but a mile from Webb's by land, a wide bend in the river made it at least two by water. Jones saw that the raft was approaching the quarter-mile stretch of rapids which lay between them and the quiet water beyond.

Though the surface of the river was still placid, the current quickened as the raft neared the higher banks. The mist was clearing rapidly in the morning light, but the white water in the distance was still indistinct.

"I'm dropping the drag now, Johnny-

haha," said Jones quietly. "Keep your pole ready."

Jones picked up the heavy chain, one end of which was secured to the raft and the other to a heavy pair of skidding tongs, and dropped it overboard. The speed of the raft was checked slightly and the butts of the cedar logs pointed noses downstream without succumbing to any tendencies to side-swing.

The next moment the raft had passed the last quiet stretch and began buffeting the rough water of the rapids.

JOHNSON dropped to a crouching position, holding his long pike like a lance. In spite of the drag the speed of the raft had increased and the hidden rocks made it jump like a bucking branco. Ananias was forced to drop to his knees in order to keep from being thrown into the swirling water. Ahead, stretching across the river like a line of ocean breakers, was a leaping wall of white that marked a blockade.

"To the left bank!" shouted Jones. Together the two men rose and by deft movements of the pikes sent the raft clear of the main current into the quiet backwater just above the foam-flecked barrier. Ananias pulled up his drag and attached the skidding tongs to the roots of a stump on the bank. The raft, thus tightly moored, was again poled into the swift current and allowed to settle against the submerged rocks. The end of the lashed logs reached the middle of the narrow river.

Jones and Johnson, working in spray that drenched them with icy water, carefully probed along the rock barrier to find hidden obstructions and to estimate the size of the rocks. Jones cursed explosively when his pike brought to light a ladder of newly-cut saplings that had been weighted and sunk in front of the rocks, cutting off a natural channel for the passage of logs.

"This is part of Spider's web, Johnnyhaha," said Jones. "I wonder if he thought Hakey was all fool. That reminds me, I wonder where Hakey went?"

It was full daylight by this time. The light from the morning sun made the rapids sparkle pleasantly.

"He'll be along," replied Johnson, taking the sapling ladder from the end of Jones' pike and throwing it ashore. "Gimme that crowbar. I can loosen a couple of these rocks and roll 'em toward shore."

Ananias was about to obey when a faint whine sounded in his ear. Almost immediately there came the report of a rifle. Another bullet followed the first; it plowed a furrow in one of the logs near Jones' leg. Ananias observed the direction of the furrow in a clump of bushes about a hundred yards upstream.

"This was a sporting proposition, wasn't it, Ananias?" asked Johnson with a grin. "Nothing serious. Just a sporting proposition."

Another bullet ploughed through the raft, not over six inches from Johnson's foot.

"Yeh, just a sporting proposition. Trying to scare us, I guess."

A fourth bullet whined between the two men, chipping splinters. Ananias slid the revolver from his belt, grinned as Johnnyhaha levered a shell into his rifle chamber.

"Far's I'm concerned," remarked Johnnyhaha, "he *is* scaring me. I don't like target practice from the wrong end!"

Jones hesitated briefly, then sent a searching shot into the trees of the opposite shore. A cry of rage echoed the shot, and three men came dashing into the open. Bullets sang from their two rifles and revolver, their zipping closeness bringing cold sweat to the men on the raft.

"Holy hell!" Ananias groaned. "We're caught like wolves in a trap!"

"You mean—rabbits," Johnnyhaha answered grimly, tried for a better aim from the lurching raft.

A swirl of rapids caught the lashed logs, spun the raft into midstream. The attackers yelled, pumped blasting shots, as the raft fled toward the river bend.

"Warm their pants, Ananias!" Johnnyhaha barked, placed two bullets squarely between the braced boots of the first attacker.

"Yeah man!" Ananias grunted, squeezed the revolver trigger.

With angry yells, the gunmen faded back toward the safety of the trees. One last burst of shots flared from their guns; then they were hidden from sight, as the raft swept around the brushy river bend. An-

anias grabbed a pike-pole, shoved against a high-riding log.

"We gotta get back there," he grunted. "I swear I saw Hakey jump one of those ambushers."

"Go ahead," Johnny panted from where he fended away a huge log. "I'll beach the raft, and be right with you."

"Take your time," Ananias said cheerfully, caught up his pike, leaped for the shore, jumping from log to log. He landed in shallow water, scrambled up the bank and sped to the scene of battle. He had covered over half the distance when a man with a rifle burst out of the woods to the left, going in the same direction. Jones was about a dozen feet away when the fellow saw him and quickly raised his rifle.

There was no time to parley. Ananias dived just as the rifle came up. A slight jerk at his left shoulder told him that he had been hit, but his dive bowled the rifleman over. Wrathfully, Jones seized his lighter opponent by the throat and shook him as a dog might a rat. His rage made him too thorough. His victim went limp in his hands and Ananias saw with horror that the face before him was nearly blue and contorted with the throes of suffocation. However, there was no time for first aid. Jones dropped his man and ran to help Hakey.

It appeared, though, that Hakey was in no great need of help.

The cowardly cowboy had given a good account of himself. He was the bottom of the scrap when Ananias appeared, but his man showed signs of having been thoroughly mauled. Moreover, Hakey released his hold on his man's neck only when Jones forced him to. The rifleman made no effort to free himself from the grip Ananias had on his collar. He was a young, dissipated-looking man, now completely cowed. Hakey rose painfully to his feet.

"Heard him shootin'," explained the foreman half apologetically. "I jumped him. I'd 'a' been on top now if I'd had a horse atween. . . ."

"Never mind about the horse," interrupted Ananias. "Shove that rifle 'gainst this feller's ribs and pull the trigger if he tries to run. Now come along. I figger I murdered this boy's pal back here."

JOHNNYHAHA, dripping water like a sea-lion newly landed on a rock, was working over Jones' victim when the three men came up. The Swede's cap was gone and his bald head shone like copper in the sun. He looked up at Jones disapprovingly.

"You did a bum job, Ananias. This feller's coming around. You must be getting weak in the fingers."

Jones breathed a sigh of relief and grinned. "I s'pose you'd made a neater job of it," he remarked sarcastically.

"Sure," said Johnson. "If a feller'd plugged me so I bled I'da done something desperate."

Jones remembered his shoulder. An examination showed the wound to be a mere scratch. "Never mind about this. Hakey, you better take these fellers up to camp and send a man to the nearest deputy sheriff. This here web of Spider's is going to land him in jail long enough for us to get the logs down. Get a warrant for these two fellers and for Webb. These boys'll talk enough to give their boss some bad hours."

A shout from the river diverted Jones and Johnson. They went down to the bank after insisting that Hakey start back with his two gunmen. The experimental run of logs was just entering the swift water. Jumping from log to log were the three experienced rivermen who waved as they went by. The sight was well worth watching. The sure-footed drivers, using their long pikes to keep the logs end-on with the channel, darted here and there, guiding their logs like a herder guides sheep.

"We haven't had time to clean the channel!" shouted Jones.

"O.K. We'll take the chance. We'll have a nice ride while she lasts," came the cheerful reply. The small run swept by.

"How'd you get so wet, Johnnyhaha?" asked Jones, as the two followed the drive.

Johnnyhaha explained soberly.

"Tried to vault across the river like you did. The pole slipped. If I'd had a horse now—" And Johnson went off into shouts of laughter that rose above the roar of the rapids.

Jones and Johnson followed the trail in their raft, clearing out obstructions as they went. A few piles of logs had

jammed here and there on the rocks, but the greatest share of the small run had gone through. The three drivers had anchored their lot at the siding and returned before the raft had gone the length of the rough water. Together, the five finished the cleaning and turned back to start the main drive.

Where the main drive was held by the boom, just above Webb's siding, there was a crowd of men—most of Webb's crew, headed by Webb himself, and half of Gehrig's men. Gehrig and Webb were arguing hotly.

"I tell you," Jones heard Webb's shrill voice say, "I'll let you send this run down in order to clear the river, but after that I keep the stream until I'm all done."

Jones and his companions joined Gehrig. Ananias smiled at Webb contemptuously.

"Listen, you tarantula," he said, "we just caught two of your gunmen and sent for the deputy sheriff. He'll have warrants for your men and one for you, charging assault with intent to kill."

"What!" screamed Webb. "I never knew a thing about it."

The giant Polly stepped to Webb's side. "What are you saying, Jones?" he asked.

Ananias explained briefly. "The warrant will keep this webspinner in jail for a while," he concluded.

Webb's face became pasty with sheer rage. His arm went swiftly to his side and came up. A bullet, meant for Jones, whistled above his head when Polly grabbed the weapon. The giant stepped between Jones and Webb, motioning Ananias back.

"Webb," said Polly fiercely, "this is the last time I'll save you from a murder charge or sudden death at someone's hands. If we can't fight fairly we won't fight at all. This for your pop-gun." He flung the automatic into the river. "It wouldn't have hurt Jones much anyway."

"Naw," put in Johnson, his expansive face wreathed in smiles. "It's only a sporting proposition anyway. Haha!" He touched Jones' shoulder. "One bullet didn't more'n scratch him. When do we start fighting?"

Polly smiled grimly. "Since Webb refuses to compromise, we'll station our men at Gehrig's landing to prevent you from putting more logs into the river. Since half your crew will have to watch the driving of the logs already in, I think we can prevent you from carrying out your threat, Gehrig. Personally, I'd prefer to compromise. Understand, gentlemen, that I'm merely carrying out orders. Come on, men."

Pushing Webb in front of him with obvious contempt, the giant led his forces in the direction of Gehrig's camp.

"WELL, now *we* lay our cards on the table," remarked Jones. "A dozen men ought to be able to make that drive, Gehrig. Better pick your scrappers."

"Suppose you be the general, Jones," said Gehrig. "You know more about fighting than I do."

"Yessir, I'll do it. I was general of an army in Peru one time and I had to run away to keep 'em from making me president of the country."

Ananias turned to the men about him and told off the experienced rivermen to take down the drive. The group of fighting men went upstream. Some of the men stationed along the river were allowed to choose fighting or working as suited their temperaments. Those who knew river work, however, were given no choice. They were ordered to stay on the job.

It was not yet eleven o'clock in the morning when the fighting group arrived at Gehrig's camp. Between the log piles and the river stood Webb's men under the leadership of Polly. Jones counted twenty-six men. Evidently Johnson's prisoners and some of their pals were waiting in camp to be hired by Gehrig. Jones was not inclined to force the issue at once. There were plenty of logs on the river and delay would serve to make Webb's men fidgety and hungry.

Yelling to Polly that they intended to start the logs rolling at any moment, Ananias sent a messenger to the river crew, ordering them to come and eat their dinner. The messenger was instructed to bring the workers by a roundabout route. Jones then led his men to Gehrig's camp, asked that dinner be served, and gave his forces instructions. The deserters from Webb's camp were present; Gehrig dealt

with them in the office before the meal was ready.

After dinner Jones sent a few men to hang around the edge of the woods and taunt Webb's forces while he and his men spent an hour resting. Hakey had helped the bull-cook escort the riflemen to the nearest village and had not yet returned to camp, though he had intended hiring a car and should have been back. All told, Ananias found that he had eighteen men to meet Polly's twenty-six. The odds were great enough.

Jones gathered his men some twenty feet from the opposing army.

"Polly," he shouted, "we're on our own territory and we're going to run our own logs. You understand that what you're doing means a stretch in jail for the whole bunch?"

"As I understand it, this is a sporting proposition, Jones," returned the giant.

"Just the same, we're going to handle our property and put it in the river. Stopping us is just as serious as using guns. Come on, boys."

Jones had made this play to undermine the confidence of Webb's men, none of whom were anxious to run foul of the law. Now he led his workers forward.

"Boys," he ordered, "put our logs in the river. If anyone tries to stop you, defend yourselves. And remember the *law* is on your side!"

The crew advanced upon the log piles and made as if to begin work.

"Stop 'em, men," shouted Webb, who was a safe distance in the rear.

Polly took the initiative. Most of his followers reluctantly imitated him. Polly had knocked down one man when Johnnyhaha reached him.

"Keep away, Jones," shouted the bald-headed Swede, "he's mine."

The next moment Johnson was sent flying on his back. Polly had not waited for polite interchanges; besides he remembered the night Johnson had nearly broken his wrist.

Ananias waded into his opponents, keeping one eye on the activities of Johnson, who had risen, wiping the blood from a split lip. Once Polly was out of the fight, Jones knew, the war would be over.

Johnson circled his giant opponent warily, dodging the heavy blows launched at him. The Swede had no chance to box against Polly's tremendous reach. Several times he failed to duck quickly enough. Each time he went down, but was up before the big Finn could follow his advantage. Johnson wasn't laughing; his vast countenance was twisted into an expression of intense concentration. He knew what he wanted to do; he waited.

In the meantime Jones and his men were meeting with both reverses and advantages. Ananias went through his opponents like a football player, slugging, wrestling and dodging. He knocked out two men, but saw that two of his own were also out of the fight. Jones worried little about his own chances, for there were no formidable fighters opposing him. He did worry about Johnson, however, and kept circling to keep near him.

FOR five long minutes Johnson played his waiting game, taking terrible punishment without being apparently affected. His round blue eyes expressed neither anger nor fear; they were merely intently watching. His chance came when Polly stumbled slightly.

With astonishing swiftness for one of his bulk, Johnnyhaha dived in and gripped Polly around the waist. He sunk his face into the giant's chest and tightened his hug. Polly rained blows on the bald head and short neck of the Swede, but failed to accomplish anything. The Swede's hug tightened every moment as he sought to bend the giant backward. Polly was forced to put every ounce of his great strength in the effort of resistance. He tried to wrench free, he clawed at Johnson's arms, and he kicked.

Johnson merely worked his feet in closer to those of the Finn and hugged a little tighter.

Slowly the giant's back began to bend —almost imperceptibly at first, but it bent. Sweat poured down Polly's face. The veins stood out like ropes on his neck; the breath whistled through his set teeth.

Unnoticed by anyone, Webb had worked his way behind Johnson. From his pocket he drew a large clasp-knife, with a long, curved blade. Watching his chance, he stole closer to the two principal fighters, keeping always behind Johnson. Jones at the moment was occupied in fighting clear

of four men who had made it their business to put him out of commission. Ten feet, eight feet—

Webb raised his knife and took another step.

At the instant of his leap, Polly, hard pressed as he was, saw his employer. With a hoarse cry he twisted Johnson out of the way and met the knife with his outstretched arm. The blade struck the forearm, glanced, and embedded itself in the giant's hip. The arm kept moving, caught Webb's neck and twisted. There was a sickening crunch as Webb was was thrown aside. The pitiful little figure twitched once and then lay still. The cry from Polly's tortured throat had stopped the fight as though by magic.

Johnnyhaha, unconscious of what threatened him, had to be almost pried loose. Polly sank on the ground and wept.

While Jones bent over the still form of Webb, Hakey, followed by a deputy sheriff, ran to his side.

"Dead?" asked the cowboy.

"Very much so," said Ananias.

"I knew it," sobbed Polly. "I couldn't see after I'd twisted. I thought at first it was his arm until I felt his chin."

"It's not your fault," said the deputy. "I saw it all and the whole thing was an unavoidable accident. If you hadn't done it the other feller would have been dead."

* * *

TWO WEEKS later, after their work had been done on a compromise basis —after Hakey had gone on a honeymoon with Mrs. Schmidt—after Webb had been buried—Jones and Johnson took the highroad in search of another job. On the way they stopped at the general store where Jones collected his fifty dollars and those of Webb, which amount Polly had insisted upon Jones taking.

"Let that Webb be a lesson to you, Johnnyhaha," said Jones when they were once more upon the road. "He was so cussed that he really killed himself, you might say. If you ain't careful you'll laugh yourself to death some time. Anyway, the way Webb died reminds me of a weasel I saw one time. He was so cussed mean that he went and chewed his own head off."

"You're crazy, Ananias. How could he get at his own neck to chew it?"

Jones stared hard at him. "You're just the kind of a guy," he said gravely, "who would go and bring *that* up."

BOOTHILL JACKPOT

By ELI COLTER

Tonapah Lee calmly rubbed elbows with murder—until a cold-deck man-trap tripped him and gripped him in its toils. Then he drew to a pair of hidden aces.

BETWEEN Bruneau, Idaho, and the Quarter-Circle-L ranch there lay a little mining town called Wahkatell.

Wahkatell was composed mainly of a single, narrow, dusty street, a few saloons, a public feed corral, a population of miners who worked in the Ten Strike Mine on the hill backing the town, a candy-drug-store-and-post-office combined and a blacksmith shop. When the boys at the Quarter-Circle-L grew overly thirsty and didn't care to ride all the way to Bruneau, they stopped off at Wahkatell.

Tonapah Lee breezed into Wahkatell one afternoon about two-thirty. Big Pete Krakow, the good-humored two fisted constable of Wahkatell, greeted him vociferously, and they had a drink. Tonapah put off a second drink to go outside and look up the street. Pete followed him.

"Damn it all," Tonapah complained, "Shorty was gonna ketch me afore I got to town, but he don't seem to show up. How does he expect me to start anything all by myself?"

PETE grinned but made no answer. Tonapah leaned up against the building, blinking his eyes at the sun. The street was as deserted as the saloon. The only person in sight was a burly fellow in miner's garb rolling along toward them in search of a drink. He paused in front of the Kumwun Kumall, saluted Big Pete gravely, and turned to scowl at a lean mangy dog that skulked at his heels.

"Git to hell outa here!" he snapped, threatening the animal with a half-raised foot.

Tone straightened from his pose against the wall. He frowned at the miner and turned investigating eyes on the dog.

It had flattened to its belly and groveled at the miner's feet. If ever a dog typified the expression "nothing but skin and bones" it was this one. Every line of his skull and joints was sharply delineated. Ribs ridged out like a washboard. His scrawny mangy hide was so dirty that it was impossible to hazard what color it might show were it clean—a long rat-like tail was tucked between his legs, a raw, blood-and-dirt coated patch on his face—a disreputable looking object.

The miner cursed as the dog crawled persistently closer to him. Again he raised a threatening foot, but this time he struck. Viciously his heavy boot toe caught the dog fairly in the belly, hoisted him into the air and hurled him into the middle of the street. The animal yelped, twisted sidewise in the dust and crawled back toward the building, still groveling.

"Say, what the hell yuh tryin' to pull off here?" Tonapah demanded hotly.

"What's it to you?" The miner wheeled to face the cowboy with belligerent eyes. "That your dog?"

"No, he ain't mine. I never saw him afore." Tonapah doubled his fists.

"Oh—the hell yuh say?" the miner sneered contemptuously. "Well, whatcha gonna do about it?"

The sentence chopped off short as Tonapah's knuckles caught him fair on the jaw. Then the fun was on. The miner came back with a will, and Tonapah tied into him like a bolt of lightning. The dog skulked up against the building, watching and shivering. The man from behind the bar came running out excitedly.

Before the fight was fairly under way the two combatants were surrounded by a hooting enthusiastic crowd. Tonapah

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Tonapah squatted back, eying the dead man.

Lee, the beloved puncher from the Quarter-Circle-L, was beating up Pugg Marbo because Pugg had kicked a stray dog.

Tone just about had his hands full. Pugg was hefty and he had a wallop like the kick of a white mule. She was a great old fight while she lasted. The two surged madly back and forth, exchanging blows and curses. Pugg charged and swore wildly. Tonapah reached him with a right cross and stepped back clear of Pugg's lunge. Tone waded into him. He feinted and smashed Pugg with right crosses, right uppercuts and counters. He jabbed him and hooked him, and Pugg went down. Tonapah landed on his chest and held him down. He had accrued a black eye and his chin was bleeding where Pugg's ring had cut in. Pugg had had enough. He was ready to quit. But Tonapah wasn't through with him. He got a good grip on Pugg's windpipe and squinted his swelling eye at the shivering dog:

"Yuh damn ornery cuss! Kickin' a pore brute that's half dead already. I got a good notion to make yuh apologize to that dawg."

"Whoopee! That's the stuff, Tone! Make him 'pologize!" yelled a voice from the edge of the crowd. Tonapah looked up to see his pard Shorty MacCaw sitting his horse and looking on with lively interest. Tonapah grinned.

"Shore as hell, boy, that's what he's gonna do!" The cowboy turned his attention to Pugg Marbo. "Yuh tell that pore damn dawg yore sorry, coyote!"

The crowd whooped and jeered, jostling nearer. Pugg twisted his head and glowered at the cowering canine. The lean fingers on his windpipe grew uncomfortably tight.

"Yuh better apologize damn quick!" "Tell him you're sorry."

"I—I—" Pugg stuttered and halted.

"Hurry up. I'm gettin' tired waitin'!"

"I'm—I'm sorry I kicked yuh," Pugg gulped, glaring at the animal.

"Yeh, and yuh better stay sorry!" Tonapah's fingers did not relax and his voice rose for the benefit of the crowd. "Yuh asked me if it was my dawg. Pete says he's a stray so I'm takin' him on."

Tonapah released the prone Pugg and leaped to his feet. The men backed to either hand, clearing a path for him, hooting and whooping as he made a bee-line for the cause of all the fracas. The animal cowed and groveled as the cowboy stooped to lift him.

"Why, yuh pore damn dawg! I ain't gonna hurt yuh!"

SHORTLY afterward, Derk Dobie was treated to a novel sight. Down the street came Tonapah Lee. The cowboy was dusty, tousled, one eye blacked, bloody smear on his jaw, fight in his good eye; and in his arms he carried a half-starved, mangy, flea-bitten dog. The dog wriggled in ecstasy at every swing of the cowboy's body and licked at his hands with a grateful tongue. Behind Tonapah trooped half the inhabitants of Wahkatell, Shorty MacCaw in the lead astride his horse.

"For God's sake what you got there?" Dobie demanded in amazement.

"Jist my dawg," Tonapah informed him gravely. "I licked one man fer him and I'll lick anybody else that tries monkeyin' with him. Now I wants some warm water, a tub and a bar of tar soap."

The liking men had for Tonapah Lee in that town was evidenced by the lively celerity with which soap, tub and water were procured. Tonapah stood the dog in the tub, scrubbed him with gentle hands, then lifted him out.

Now relieved of dirt and fleas, the dog was revealed a halfgrown animal of unbelievable skinny condition. His bony lines were accentuated by his lean, long-legged build. Small ears fell over at the tips. His hide was a uniform pale and sandy gray. Big eyes regarded Tonapah anxiously from his lean face, and the long rat tail came out from between his legs to wag at the man who stood watching him.

"Well, yo're a pretty hard lookin' specimen right now," Tonapah drawled.

"Don't you know what kind of a dog that is, Tone?" Doc Wilbaugh, veterinary, coroner, undertaker and character of the town, edged forward eagerly. "Why's he's a greyhound!"

"Hell! Is that right?" Tonapah turned to receive a plate of scraps Dobie had brought, and leaned to place them on the ground for the dog. "Thanks, Derk.

Greyhound! Well, I'll be damned! Fill yore belly, now, dawg, while I go git my horse. Then we's goin' home."

Tonapah turned and strode off toward the barn. The men stood around watching Tone's dog eat as though this were a strange phenomenon they had never before witnessed. The hound was licking the plate clean when Tonapah returned leading Blackie. The cowboy picked the dog up in his arms and swung into the saddle.

"What yuh gonna call him, Tone?" called Smithy, the heavy-muscled blacksmith.

"Jist Dawg," Tonapah grinned.

The pup wriggled his delight and licked the cowboy's hand.

"Good-bye, boy," yelled Big Pete Krakow. "Take care of that Dawg!"

"Yuh leave it to me!" Tonapah returned vigorously. "So long, everybody. Come on, Shorty."

As the two cowboys rode off down the dusty street side by side, and the men turned to straggle back into the town, Shorty spoke with a frown:

"I reckon yuh want to keep yore eyes open for Pugg, Tone. Yuh've made him hell-fired mad. He's a mean customer. He'll be layin' fer yuh."

"Aw, to hell with him!" Tone urged Blackie into a trot. "Anytime he comes monkeyin' around me he'll git what he ain't lookin' fer!"

"Well, he'll do some monkeyin', all right!" Shorty warned. "I'm tellin' yuh. I've heard of that guy before. Yuh want to keep yore eyes peeled!"

Out at the Quarter-Circle-L Tonapah's Dawg was received with much surprise and interest. The interest sustained through succeeding weeks and months. Dawg grew rapidly into a tall, gaunt animal with beautiful lean lines. Tonapah began training him into little tricks about the ranch. The first task he undertook was that of making Dawg solid friends with Blackie. Given the natural liking between horses and dogs, that was easy. Then he began teaching Dawg to lead Blackie out of barn and corral. He would saddle the big gelding, leave him standing, reins dragging, and command Dawg to "go git old Blackie." Dawg and Blackie seemed to think well of the order of things.

As time went by Dawg proved his mettle, developed his endurance and displayed his speed. He was all over the ranch with Tonapah. A year—and Dawg become an accepted part of the cowboy's life. In Wahkatell it became a familiar sight to see the lean beautiful hound trotting majestically down the dusty street leading the big black horse. And it became a byword in the town, repeated by anyone within visual range the moment horse and dog appeared —"there's Dawg and Blackie. Tone's goin' home."

Everybody had about forgotten the furious fistic encounter that had brought Tonapah his treasured Dawg. That is, everybody except the vindictive Pugg Marbo.

IT was along late in the summer, nearing time for the fall round up, that Jim Stretcher, owner of the Quarter-Circle-L, sent Tonapah out to look up a bunch of strays reported caught in a trap in a washout. The cowboy started out after breakfast on a wiry little buckskin, leaving Blackie to take his ease. Dawg, now nearly two years old, ran lightly alongside.

Tonapah had gotten out about five miles and was nearing the washout when the buckskin shied, sniffed and pricked up his ears. Dawg stopped short, whining and growling, turned and began a slow advance toward a thick brush clump off to the left.

Tonapah pulled his mount to a halt and watched Dawg intently. What the hell was wrong about that clump of brush? Dawg circled it warily, whining and looking back at his master. Then he returned to Tonapah's side, paused by the stirrup and gave vent to an excited bark. Tonapah promptly swung out of the saddle and made off toward the clump, his hand hovering above his belt. Dawg followed, whining, hackles rising, long tail straight and rigid. Tonapah leaned to part the brush, and Dawg growled again, a warning uneasy growl.

Nothing was disclosed inside the low-lying clump save a long uneven place in the sod where the earth had been lately broken and replaced. Dawg's continued anxious growl impelled Tonapah to be suspicious of that break. He hunted

around for a stick of stout proportions and began to dig. Frowning, he started back in dismay as he cleared the earth from a man's hand. Dawg continued to growl, lying flat on his belly and edging close to Tonapah. Tone paid little attention to him. He was interested in seeing who had been killed and slyly buried on the Quarter-Circle-L.

The body uncovered, it proved to be a small lean man with a sandy beard, a man Tonapah had never seen before. There was a deep dent on one side of the head where some heavy instrument had crashed in the skull.

Tonapah squatted back on his heels, eying the dead man, when his gaze was caught by a piece of wood sticking to the begrimed shirt. He picked it up and scrutinized it. It had been whittled out with a jackknife. Evidently intended for and had been used as a wedge. Tonapah shoved it into his shirt pocket.

He re-covered the body swiftly and rose to his feet. The only thing for him to do was make a bee-line for Wahkatell and report to the coroner. He returned to the buckskin, Dawg whining at his heels, and swung into the saddle.

AS he rode back toward the ranch buildings at a high gallop he reflected that the body had been cleverly hidden. But why on the Quarter-Circle-L?

Arrived at the Quarter-Circle-L buildings, Tonapah turned the buckskin into the corral, saddled Blackie and went into the cook shack to leave word with the cook.

"Say, Hop, when the boss comes in at noon tell him to have Shorty or somebody go after them strays. I got important business in Wahkatell."

"Shuah—me tellum." Hop Lee nodded vigorously. "Whassa mahla?"

Tonapah wheeled and hurried out, calling to the eagerly waiting hound, "Dawg, go git old Blackie."

At noon when the men came in to dinner, Hop reported Tonapah's message. Stretcher shrugged and turned to Shorty MacCaw.

"Shorty, you go git them strays I sent Tone for this mornin'."

Shorty nodded and slipped into a seat at the table. Funny time of day for Tone to go tearing off like that. Tone didn't disobey the boss's orders without a damn good reason. Something was wrong somewhere when Tone pulled a stunt like that. Yeh, he'd bring in the strays, all right. Make quick work of it, too. Then he'd hit the breeze for Wahkatell himself.

It was growing dusk when Tonapah reached Wahkatell. He left Blackie standing in Dobie's barn to cool off, still saddled and bridled. He would put him up for the night after he had seen Wilbaugh.

Wilbaugh's office was slightly isolated, at the lower edge of town. Back of the office was a long adjoining room serving as undertaker's shop and work room. The rear door of the back room opened upon the brush and tree clad hill that backed the town. The hill upon which the Ten Strike mine was situated. Beyond the rear door the back trail from the Ten Strike came down and joined the one street of Wahkatell.

Wilbaugh slammed down his paper and greeted his visitor.

"Howdy, Tonapah! H'lo, Dawg. What's goin' on at the Quarter-Circle-L?"

"Murder," Tonapah answered succinctly, closing the door behind Dawg.

Wilbaugh sat up so suddenly that he nearly fell off his chair.

"I found a dead man under a clump of brush this mornin' when I was goin' after some strays fer the old man. Ain't any idee who he is. Been knocked in the head with somethin'."

"Hell! Can you beat that?" Wilbaugh leaned forward excitedly.

Tonapah went on.

"I found this piece of wood on the fella's shirt. I ain't got no idee what it come off of, but it might be a clue."

He drew the wedge of wood from his pocket and extended it toward Wilbaugh.

"Yeh, it might. Looks like a wedge. Might have come off the thing that bashed that poor guy's head in. I'll keep it, anyway." Wilbaugh turned the small piece of wood over in his hand, then slipped it into a wallet and put the wallet in his pocket. "All right, Tone. Be ready to

go right out with you in the morning. You sure acted prompt. Thanks."

"You bet. Come on, Dawg." Tonapah opened the door and went out, Dawg at his side.

He hadn't gone twenty paces when Wilbaugh opened the door and called after him guardedly:

"Say, Tonapah! Don't make no remarks to Pete Krakow about finding that body. Leave it to me. Don't say nothing to nobody. Where'd you say you found that wedge?"

"Right on his shirt," Tonapah answered. "No, of course, I won't say nothing."

Wilbaugh returned a farewell and closed his door. Thoughtfully he pulled the wedge from the wallet and examined it again. Suddenly memory wakened as he stared at it. He jerked out a startled oath and turned at a rapid stride toward his rear room. Against that room's wall leaned a miner's pick, a pick he had borrowed from Pugg Marbo that morning, to break out some refractory rock in the cellar he was enlarging.

In the end of the wood handle, where it was fitted into the eye of the pick, Marbo had made a niche for a small wedge to force tight the iron head. It was unusual. Wilbaugh had noticed it. He had seen a lot of miners' picks, but Marbo's was the only one he had ever seen containing that tightening wedge. It might not have caught his eye so quickly but for the fact that where the wedge had been was only a hole. The wedge had come out, and the hole was cleaner than the rest of the wood. The wedge had come out *lately.*

With narrowed eyes Wilbaugh bent and raised the pick. He tried the wedge to the hole. It fitted perfectly. Obviously it was the original plug from the handle. With a grim smile Wilbaugh placed the pick back against the wall and returned the wedge to the wallet. He would immediately go out and tell Pete Krakow to arrest Pugg and hold him till after the inquest.

Two miners, coming down the back trail, had stopped short at the brief words passed between Tonapah and Doc Wilbaugh. One of them gripped the other's arm as Tonapah went on down the street and Wilbaugh closed his door.

"What the hell!" he ejaculated in dismay. "Did yuh hear that, Blair? Tonapah! We better beat it for Pugg's damn quick!"

The two wheeled about and retraced their steps at a run, bringing up panting at the shack occupied by Pugg Marbo. Blair banged peremptorily on the door.

"Who's there?" Pugg opened the door and thrust out his head. It was quite dark by this time, and Pugg squinted to be certain of the face of his visitor. "Oh, that you Blair? Who's with yuh, Wick? What's up?"

"Hell, I reckon," Blair responded shortly. "Tonapah Lee was just leaving Doc Wilbaugh's shop as we come down the hill. We heard Doc ask him not to say nothing to Pete Krakow about finding that body, and where did he say he got that wedge. This—"

"Hell's bells!" Marbo interrupted, grasping Blair's arm. "For Gawd's sake talk fast!"

"That's all," snapped Blair. "Don't go off half cocked. Tonapah went on and Wilbaugh shut the door. The body he found may not be the same one—"

"It can't be anything else, yuh poor fool!" Marbo cut in. "They ain't got dead men planted all over the Quarter-Circle-L. I missed the wedge outa that handle when I scrubbed it up this mornin' early and put the head back on. Damn the luck! How did he ever run across the stiff? Just when I was gettin' things so pretty, too! I'd have had that damn nosey puncher in jail for murder inside of another day!"

He reached for his gunbelt.

WHEN Wilbaugh placed the pick back against the wall and returned to the office room, he was greeted by Pugg Marbo coming in the door. Marbo assumed a casual air.

"Evenin', Doc. I was just wantin' to ask yuh for my pick. I kind of need it before I go to work in the mornin'."

"I see." Wilbaugh gave the miner a long stare, thinking swiftly. Marbo knew something. This was no coincidence. He answered with suave casualness. "Well, I need it a little longer, myself, Pugg."

Pugg's face darkened as he saw the expression on Wilbaugh's face.

"You hand it over!" he demanded harshly, taking a step forward and whipping out a gun. "And that wedge, too. Wick—you and Blair come on in. No use bluffin'. He's wise."

Wick and Blair shouldered quickly into the small office, closing the door behind them. Wilbaugh, paling a trifle, backed to the wall.

"No funny work," Pugg warned. "We've got yuh cold, and we has some business to attend to before mornin'. Blair, tie that guy's hands behind him. Wick, I got a errand fer yuh."

TONAPAH was just thinking about leaving the Kumwun Kumall when Wick came hurrying down the street, glancing swiftly into every door he passed. As the miner spied the cowboy in the saloon, he turned in and walked up to him.

"You're Tonapah Lee, ain't yuh? Well, I was just comin' by Doc Wilbaugh's, and he asked me to tell you to step over to his office right away. He wants to see yuh about somethin'."

"All right, thanks. I'll go right down." Tonapah nodded and stepped back from the bar.

Tonapah ambled down to the coroner's office and stepped inside. Wilbaugh stood just to the left of the door. As Tonapah turned his head, involuntarily, to glance inquiringly at Wilbaugh, the vicious blow of a gun wielded from behind him struck him on the head. The cowboy went down and out without a sound.

Dawg leaped furiously at the triumphant leering Pugg. The miner caught him in the ribs with a vicious kick that hurled him across the room, slammed him up against the wall, knocked his breath out and left him whining in pain. As the dog struck the floor Wick ran in and closed the door behind him, drawing his gun on the animal.

"Don't shoot him here, yuh fool!" Marbo snapped. "Want to bring the whole town in on us? Tie that damn nosey cowpuncher up and throw him in the back room, and the doc, too. Gag 'em both, so they can't let a yip out of 'em. We can't afford to make a slip now. And throw the damn dog in there and tie him up, too. Then go up the hill and git the team hitched to the buckboard. Soon's we git fixed we'll beat it."

"Gonna leave them here?" Wick gestured toward the senseless Tonapah, and toward Doc Wilbaugh.

"Hell, no!" grunted Marbo.

Tonapah came back to consciousness to feel his bound body being thrown roughly into the back end of a buckboard. His mouth was painfully clogged with a gag, and the darkness was so intense that he could see nothing. Beside him he felt the bulk of another body. In the impenetrable blackness by the buckboard he heard someone moving. Back somewhere Dawg growled.

Marbo was talking to Wilbaugh.

"Yuh'll have a hell of a time provin' there's been a murder without a corpse to show fer it. I got the pick and the wedge I frisked yuh fer, lyin' up there under the seat. We're gonna tie you guys to a coupla trees, dig up the stiff and beat it."

Wilbaugh cursed silently to himself. Marbo was no fool. Carrying his evidence with him, getting rid of the dog, making a clean getaway. Tone had listened, grim-faced. The buckboard rattled off into the night, and Dawg trotted behind, following wherever his master went, whether he went by his own volition or another man's force.

It was nearing 4 a. m. before the dawn began to show much light in the sky. The light increased rapidly. By the time the buckboard turned off from the rough uneven back road to the open country leading to where the dead man was buried, the trees were showing up in the early dusk and Dawg was visible for a fleeting instant now and then trotting behind. Marbo called over his shoulder, where he sat facing the rear:

"Pull up, Wick. I want to git rid of that dawg first thing we do." Wick pulled the team to a halt, and Marbo drew his gun from its holster. "Here, Dawg! Here, Dawg! Come 'ere!"

The dog had stopped short as the buckboard stopped, and slunk behind a clump of brush. He made no move as Marbo called, but stood out of sight where he had paused, warily watching the man he hated through the brush. Marbo called again, peremptorily, but still the dog made

no move. Marbo leaped to the ground and started toward him. Sensing danger, warned by some uncanny intuition, the dog leaped away and darted out of sight. Marbo cursed angrily and returned to the buckboard.

Climbing into the back end, he bent over Tonapah and removed the gag from his mouth. Shoving the Colt .45 against Tonapah's ribs, he ordered sharply:

"Sit up and call that damn Dawg of yours. I could chase him all day and never git a chance at him. And be damn quick about it, too, or I'll let daylight into yuh. Call him right up to the wagon!"

Tonapah struggled to a sitting position, his eyes, cold as blue ice, mad as all hell, glaring at Marbo. Marbo prodded him suggestively with the gun, and Tonapah turned his gaze toward the direction in which Dawg had disappeared. The dog had sneaked part way back again and come to a halt behind another clump of brush. Nothing was visible of him but the end of his long tail. Tonapah's face went white, and his features set in the lines that made other men afraid.

"Dawg!"

The cowboy's voice was steady, cool. He knew exactly what he was doing. Dawg would know. Dawg was familiar with his commands. The cowboy hadn't said, "come here." When he just said Dawg, it meant stand. The animal went still, his ears pricked up, listening, and Tonapah saw the end of the long tail grow rigidly motionless. Then swiftly and clearly Tonapah called the order for which Dawg was waiting.

"Dawg—go git old Blackie!"

There was a flash of gray shadow behind the brush clump, and Dawg was gone like a shot. Running like a streak of gray shadow flattened out over the ground, swallowed and hidden from sight by the ranks of trees.

"Damn you!" Marbo holstered his gun and drove a heavy fist into Tonapah's jaw. "I don't dare kill yuh — they know you too well around here. Nobody knew that stray prospector I bumped off. But I'll pay yuh fer that! Damn yer dirty hide!"

Right and left, he swung his hard fists to Tonapah's helpless body and head, till the cowboy's senses swam and he dropped back on the floor of the buckboard unconscious.

IT was past dawn and the sun was rising well into the sky when Dawg loped into Wahkatell and raced to Dobie's barn where Blackie had been waiting patiently for endless hours. Dobie had grinned and told himself that Tone must be on a hell-roarer to leave Blackie standing that way, but he'd send the dog for him when he was ready to go home. Righteously feeling that he was minding his own business, Dobie had left the horse alone and gone to bed. It was midnight when Shorty MacCaw had come banging at his door, demanding:

"Where the hell is Tonapah Lee?"

"Drunk," Dobie had grinned sleepily.

"Drunk hell!" Shorty had retorted. "Somethin's damn wrong! I was just in the barn — Tone don't leave Blackie standin' that way!"

"I know it," Dobie had frowned, made uneasy by Shorty's hot anxiety. "Whatcha think is wrong?"

"Damn if I know," Shorty had answered succinctly. "But I'm damn well gonna find out. Soon's it's daylight I'm gonna git Pete Krakow and start the ball rollin'."

And when Dawg loped in to paw frantically at the barn door, Big Pete and Shorty MacCaw were standing on the porch talking to Derk Dobie, planning the best procedure to employ in getting trace of Tonapah Lee.

"Damn! He did send the dog, after all!" Shorty leaped to the ground and ran to open the barn door for Dawg. "Come on, Dobie — we may need you, too. Slap some saddles on, and let's take an extra horse. We may need that."

And twenty minutes later Dawg loped out of Wahkatell again, Blackie galloping behind him. It was a strange race in the early morning. The great greyhound, leading the shining black horse, with three grim-faced, heavily armed men following, and a riderless horse bringing up at the rear of the little cavalcade.

When Marbo and Blair returned to pick up Wick, whom they had left guarding Wilbaugh and Tonapah, the sun was high in the sky. Tonapah, his head splitting and his eyes burning red, was tied to a tree, still

gagged; Wilbaugh, as utterly helpless, was tied to another tree some ten feet distant. They were in a small gulch, surrounded by a thick growth of trees and brush, well aside from the regular road and the trails of the men passing anywhere within miles of the spot. Marbo had left Blair on the ridge with the buckboard and entered the thick grove afoot.

"Well, Wick, come on and pile in. We're gettin' away clean! If these guys don't starve to death before that dawg or somebody finds 'em, their talk won't do 'em no good anyway. A dug-up place in the brush don't prove nothin'. That's all they'll have to show. Next time we ditch that guy we croaked we'll make sure nobody's gonna find him.

"As fer you, Tonapah Lee, I croaked that guy and planted him there to git even with yuh for beatin' me up a while back. I had things all comin' pretty, and I'd a had you in jail fer murder inside of twenty-four hours if yuh hadn't fouled my little scheme. But I've give yuh a damn nice beatin' today, and yo're gonna git damn good and hungry afore anybody runs acrost yuh out here. So I reckon we're kind of evened up, at that. Next time yuh go nosin' inta somebody else's business, yuh wanta be careful who yo're monkeyin' with. Come on, Wick. Let's git outa here."

Tonapah turned a colorless face toward Wilbaugh. Wilbaugh gazed back at him, and the two bound men knew each other's thoughts. Denied speech by virtue of the tight gags in their mouths, they talked with their eyes.

"I reckon they got away on us," Tonapah's ice cold gaze said clearly. "Unless Dawg kin hang on long enough to find us, we kin starve in this damn place. I reckon it's too much to ask of a pore hound dawg to ever git here in time to catch them dirty snivvlin' coyotes."

"Too *damn* much." Wilbaugh's eyes assented grimly. "It's a good forty miles from here to town. That's seventy miles the pore brute'd have to run. Hell, man —he can't make it!"

"Yuh don't know Dawg!" Tonapah's eyes blazed. "He's greased lightnin'! What the hell is seventy mile? More'n one day he's run seventy mile on the ranch, roundin' up strays and chasin' coyotes. And he ain't done up. He wasn't more'n dog-trottin' followin' the buckboard, and he went back like a bat out of hell. He kin plumb walk away from Blackie. If I'd put Blackie to his speed he could make that trip in eight hours. And if Blackie could make it in eight hours, Dawg could make it in the same time."

"Aw hell," the Doc's eyes jeered disgustedly, as he sagged wearily against his bonds. "What you think that brute is, a bird? It's been over seven hours already!"

Seven hours! Tonapah set his teeth and groaned in futile rage. It had been seven hours and over since Dawg turned back at his command, running like a flashing gray shadow. He nodded and dropped against the tree.

Then he stiffened suddenly as he heard the sound of thundering feet, horses' feet! Feet that drummed down the ridge, turned into the gulch and slowed as they entered the thick-growing copse of trees and brush. He straightened, straining at his bands, and his eyes widened, staring in the direction from which the sound came. Wilbaugh glanced at him in wild conjecture, and his eyes, too, turned to stare with painful intensity. Then, from the throats of both bound men, sounded a gurgle that would have been a wild shout had their tongues been free.

STRAIGHT toward them, following the scent of his master's feet from the buckboard trail, weary but game, came the great greyhound. The big, black horse crashed through the brush behind him. And as horse and Dawg advanced, weaving between the trees, to the rear of them there came into sight Shorty MacCaw, Derk Dobie and Big Pete Krakow. Krakow was leading the extra horse. The hound and the big black came to a halt before the cowboy, and Shorty flung himself headlong from his mount.

"Hell's fire, man! I knowed yuh was in a jackpot!" With swift fingers he ripped the gag from Tonapah's mouth and whipped out his knife to slash the ropes that bound him. "What's the racket? Who got yuh? Which way did they go?"

"Murderers," Tonapah explained rapidly, as Shorty stared at his battered face and Dobie and Krakow freed Wilbaugh. "Pugg Marbo and two others went north in a buckboard." He staggered to the big black and climbed with difficulty into the saddle. "Gimme yore gun, Shorty. I'm used to it. Them fellas borried mine and plumb forgot to give it back."

"What the hell yuh think yo're gonna do?" Shorty demanded as he handed over his Colt .45.

"I'm goin' after Pugg Marbo!" Tonapah gritted, savagely, his eyes burning like opals, red anger's light through the blue ice. "I'm gonna circle ahead of 'em. They can't have got a mile away. Old Blackie'll pass that buckboard as easy as a fast freight'd pass a hay wagon! You guys come on behind. I'll halt 'em and we'll all close in at the same time. But yuh leave Pugg Marbo to me! Come on, Dawg, this is the home stretch. Reckon yore tired, but I shore wants yuh to see that stinkin' polecat die! Git goin', Shorty!"

TONAPAH leaned low in the saddle, guiding Blackie between the trees, up the gulch's bank to the ridge and off to the left down the buckboard trail. The big hound, panting and heaving, his tongue lolling, loped valiantly behind as Blackie thundered after the fleeing murderers. The horse's long stride skimmed over the ground, ate into the few intervening miles. Swiftly, Tonapah and his mount drew out of sight of the following men.

Far ahead the buckboard came in sight. Tonapah swerved the big black out in a wide arc to cut in ahead of it. He glanced over his shoulder. The other four were nowhere in sight. Only Dawg, weary, with lolling tongue, called on his last spurt of speed and doggedly followed where Tonapah and Blackie led.

The cowboy urged the sweat-lathered horse to his utmost effort, shot past the buckboard, out of sight among the trees, and wheeled into the road to meet the advancing wagon. The three unsuspecting miners rounded a turn in the road to come upon a heaving, sweat-washed, black horse standing squarely in the middle of their path. They heard a curt order from a grim man with a battered face.

"Reach for the clouds and be damn quick about it!"

Marbo went for his gun as Wick pulled up the team. Tonapah laughed joyously as his hand dropped. But it was a sinister joyousness, grim, naked with raging fury. The Colt .45 Shorty had loaned him reared in the holster, spat and roared. Marbo jerked and sagged in his seat. Wick stiffened and pulled tight on the reins.

"Yuh *better* hold yore horses!" Tonapah drawled. "I kin git both of yuh afore yuh make a move. Reach high, damn yuh!"

Behind the buckboard Shorty came in sight, whooping wildly at the tableau that met his eyes. Dobie, Krakow, and Doc Wilbaugh riding the extra horse, strung along at Shorty's rear. As they came abreast the buckboard and surrounded it, Wick ripped out a savage oath.

"Cuss, damn yuh! Yo're goin' over the road!" Doc Wilbaugh snapped. "Marbo's croaked, eh? Well, yuh saved the State one hangin' anyway, Tone." He turned to Krakow. "Thanks to Tone things is jake. He's a go-getter from hell. Brings in word he's found a body, digs up a clue, corrals the murderers and all the evidence."

"Come on, Shorty, git these fellas' guns and help me tie 'em up," Big Pete ordered.

"Tie up the dead ones, too?" Shorty waxed facetious in his relief.

"You go to hell!" grinned Krakow. "Two undertakin's, Doc. Business is lookin' up for you, thanks to Tone."

"Nope!"

Tonapah's bloody, battered face wrinkled in a smile. He swung out of the saddle and walked toward the great hound. Dawg had thrown himself on the ground, tongue hanging out, dripping sweat, heaving in utter exhaustion.

"It was Dawg found that pore dead stiff, not me. It was Dawg went and brought yuh along to where me'n Doc was at. If it hadn't been fer Dawg—Hell! We ain't got a damn soul to thank but jist Dawg! Come on, Dawg, I'm gonna carry yuh home!"

LONE-WOLF LAW

By H. M. S. KEMP

To the Mounties he was "No. 1664—escaped." But among his Cree brothers he was The-Man-Who-Travels-Alone—and only the lone-wolf heart knew why he came to give the lie to his name.

HIS Indian name was Oopayuko-pimotow, "The-man-who-travels-alone." The white men called him Joe Sinclair. But on the records of Edmonton penitentiary he was merely "No. 1664."

They were unfinished, those records, for against the number was a notation in red ink: *Escaped.*

For five years the Scarlet Police had sought Joe Sinclair; picked up his trail at raided cache or looted trading-store; had him in their fingers only to have him slip through them again. He ridiculed their efforts, mocked their traditions, and, worst of all, set a bad example to the five thousand other Crees scattered between the Saskatchewan and the Barrens.

Superintendent Gans, O. C. of "F" Division, swore he would nail him if it took twenty years and every man in the Force. But Gans would not admit that Sinclair should never have been jailed in the first place. "Three card" McGinnis, the man whom Sinclair had knifed on the Whitefish River, needed killing. He was a gambler, a crook, and merited his dramatic end. The Indian deserved a card of thanks. Had he been given that, instead of seven years in the penitentiary, the Police would have had one less outlaw on their hands.

BUT tonight it looked as though the course of Joe Sinclair was ended. Outside Lavalee's trading-post, a score of men herded in the sickly moonlight, yelling for him to come out and surrender. But not one of them dared go into the place and fetch him. They knew him too well. Six-foot-one of spare rawhide, the strength of a grizzly and the temper of one, dangerous sloe eyes and a thin-lipped, mocking smile. Such was Sinclair, the renegade.

Treachery was responsible for the capture that looked so imminent. Sinclair had called Lavalee friend; had notified the man three weeks before that he would, tonight, be down for supplies to carry him to the Arctic. And Lavalee had notified the police.

Amongst the howls of the crowd, the Indian had recognized the voice of Benton. He knew Benton, sergeant of the Scarlet Force; Benton, growing old and stiff in the Service. He and Benton had had many a merry chase. It would be mortifying if the grizzled sergeant should triumph at the last.

There came the voice of the man himself.

"You, Joe! D'you hear me? Come out and come quietly, and there'll be no fuss."

The Indian, crouching in the darkness, crinkled his eyes in silent contempt.

"D'you hear?" Again Benton, impatiently. "I'll give you one minute, then I'll shoot up the place."

"You weel, eh?" sneered Sinclair. "Twenty to one—and you scaire for tak' chance!"

The moonlight shone for a moment on two sets of cap badges, on two red tunics and sidearms. Benton, this time, was not alone. There was another of the accursed Police with him.

The Indian got to his feet, commenced a stealthy movement toward the door. Along the wall he worked, keeping away from the open space in the middle of the floor. Ten feet from the door he paused hesitant. From outside came a low growl, ominous, threatening. His lips lifted in a snarl and he cursed himself for leaving his carbine on his sleigh. Now, if he were armed. . . .

He commenced a retreat, soundlessly, skirting the wall till he came to a window above his head. For a moment he looked at it calculatingly. It was behind the laden

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Over the crest crawled a parkaed man.

shelves, a tiny six-pane affair, the smashing of which would herald his intent long before its accomplishment. He moved on.

Crr-r-assh!

Suddenly, the interior was lit with unholy yellow light as the minute of grace expired. Bullets, six of them, ripped across the building to thud themselves into the far wall.

"Now — are you coming?" Benton's voice again.

The Indian crouched. His hand came into contact with a sack of fur — and he suddenly heaved it at the knot of indistinct figures clustered about the open door. There was a gasp of uncertainty, a wavering as the figures fell back, and in that instant he charged.

Head down, fists working before him, he crashed into them. An arm hung for a second about his neck; others tore at his clothing. His shoulders heaved mightily, like those of a crazed moose. . . . Then he was free, sprinting for the hill leading down to the lake.

BEHIND him came shrill cries; oaths in English and Cree; then the staccato barking of a six-gun. Sinclair zigzagged, twisted, his blanket parka flapping around him; and he gained the top of the bank.

Below, heads to the North, were his string of dogs, six of the biggest huskies that had ever crossed the lake. Waiting they were, prepared for just this contingency. Twenty yards away he roared his command.

"Borie! Mussinass! *Mar-rche!*"

The dogs leaped to their collars. Another jump, a wild sprint of a hundred yards. . . . He flung himself down on the whipping sleigh.

It was the night of the full moon. Before him stretched Caribou Lake, its frozen vastness broken only by tiny islands of ragged-fingered spruce. Beyond that would be other lakes, and a perfect labyrinth of rivers and creeks. Beyond that again, lay the Barrens — the ultimate; the frozen silence. Forbidding they were, terrible, but in the heart of them a man might yet be safe. Sinclair yelled to his dogs and, bellies almost touching the snow, they tore over the trail.

Whanng!

From the rear a rifle roared. There was the frenzied barking of dogs. The Indian turned, and saw two snaky objects swing down the path from the store and out onto the lake. Then there were more shots, three in rapid succession, and three bursts of crimson-tongued flame spat from the rear.

Zip! A bullet plowed through the snow at his side. *Wah-h-h!* The whine of two more sang over his head.

Sinclair grunted and turned around on his sleigh. From beneath the lashed-on cover he drew out a thirty-thirty carbine, pumped in a shell and sent four shots in the direction of the following sleighs. He paused expectant. But to these there was no reply. His thin lips twisted in a crooked smile.

Miles dropped away; hours swiftly followed each other; and at the first flush of dawn he pulled his leg-weary dogs to a halt in a tamarack bluff. There, with a watchful eye on the trail he had come, he boiled a hasty kettle and fed the dogs a half-fish apiece.

Two days later, confident for the moment of being out of range, the Indian went into camp. He needed rest. So did his dogs. And there were matters of moment to settle at once.

Chief of these was the matter of grub. Except for two frozen bannocks and a handful of tea, his grubstake was nil. If all had gone well, if Lavalee had not turned snake, he would have had plenty. The few skins of fur he carried in his packsack would have been sufficient to trade for what food he needed.

He could, of course, swing west, toward Hatchet River and the camps of the Chipewyans, but there was a drawback to this. If he found grub for himself, there would be grub for Benton. And Benton was certain to follow him. His only hope was that Benton was no better equipped than was he himself. The sergeant had looked for an easy arrest; not for a long chase as it now turned out to be. And the way those dog-teams had taken up the trail told the Indian very plainly that no stop had been made by Benton to grub-up in preparation.

Sinclair decided that the safest policy was to travel straight north and trust to luck. He was in a game country; sooner

or later he would run on deer, and from that time on all would be well.

He spread his blankets, began to unhitch his dogs . . . then, suddenly sensed, nostrils quivering.

There had come a sound, vague, indefinite, but nonetheless real. It was not the crack of a spruce tree in the frost; not the hiss of the fire, nor the pop of a coal. It was . . . it was . . . ?

Again it came, this time from close at hand — the crashing of a dog-whip and the hoarse yell of a man.

The Indian wheeled, re-harnessed his leader, and was off like a scared wolf.

THREE times in the next two days this happened: once when finishing an almost barren meal, again when waking from a half-hour sleep. For the first time in his life something akin to fear grasped the Indian. Benton had better dogs than he had given him credit for, or the man had a stock of grub behind him. The most amazing part of all was that Benton could travel as he did. He was getting old, was stiffening up, and the pace that Sinclair had set him was no easy one. Then the realization came. It could not be the sergeant who was tracking him. It was the other man, his companion.

A hard light came into the Indian's eyes. This was to be a test of endurance, a fight fought to the last ounce of will-power and strength. He himself was battling for his liberty; the man behind for the traditions of his Force. So be it. Joe Sinclair asked no more.

The next day, after a hundred and twenty miles of forced travel, he had his first glimpse of him. From a bare, wind-blasted knoll on the Barrens' edge he looked back. Three miles to the rear, between the bluffs of stunted jack-pine, was a moving speck. Moving — but slowly. It took all of half an hour for the speck to transform itself into a man, a train of dogs, and a sleigh. The man was traveling alone.

Sinclair allowed him to close the gap of three miles to a gap of one. Then the hard light in his eyes turned to one of savage exultation. The man was making painful progress. He could see it in the way he plowed beside the dogs, yanking on the head of the sleigh. The dogs, too, seemed spent.

Heartened now, the Indian pulled away. If his own pace was slow, the other man's was a crawl. His own position was serious; the other man's was grave. For meat had become the important thing, the only thing that mattered. And in this Joe Sinclair held the deal. If there were caribou in the country, he would come on them first.

They were in the Barrens now. Through smoked goggles the Indian swept the desolate terrain. Snow-dunes, ridges, a lone, wind-twisted tree, and a sun of burnished brass swinging, at noon, a hands-breadth above the sky-line. But not a thing that lived. Not even a whisky-jack. If they did not come on meat soon. . . .

The dogs were weaving. They had had their last scrap of fish thirty-six hours before. That was when Sinclair had eaten the remaining crumbs of his bannock.

At sundown, which was three of the afternoon, Sinclair killed a caribou. It was alone, a straggler from the rest of the band gone heaven knew where. In size it was not much bigger than a healthy bull-calf, but it meant life. The dogs gorged themselves on the entrails. Sinclair roasted steaks on the end of his gun-rod.

When the meal was ended he loaded the carcass on his sleigh. Not a scrap did he leave, not a piece of the hide. The blood-soaked snow, even, he pounded underfoot, covering it with more snow, fresh, from near at hand.

He moved toward the rear of the sleigh, glanced up, and caught again that moving speck in the near distance. His Nemesis was still following him.

But it would not be for long; soon it would be dark, save for the waning moon. The Indian knew that the trail he left was all the other man had to guide him. Night would wipe it out from the crusted snow.

Thus, he struck for the west, angling sharply this way and that, and five miles from the where he had made his kill he stopped. He spread his robes in the lee of the sleigh, pulling his dogs around him for warmth, and went into cheerless camp.

NOR did he wake early. His first look was toward the south, but there was no sign of the man who had clung to his trail. Sinclair laughed softly, rustled a handful of dry sticks and began to roast more meat.

The cold was terrific. Even before the tiny blaze he dared not remove his mitts. Cowled in his parka, the rabbit-robe spread over his shoulders, he watched the sun come up over the rim of the Barrens. To the south the smoke went down in long wraith-like fingers, spreading out like a shroud over a petrified world.

The dogs shook themselves; yawned; sniffed at the sizzling meat. They were blacks, all six of them. Now they were calicos, pintos, turned patchy white from their own concealed breath. Sinclair spoke to them in purring Cree.

"You smell something, little ones? Lucky are you! Now those others that follow behind. . . . But why speak of them? Some day a wolf will be well fed."

He laughed again, grimly, at his jest. Then a look of stark wonderment came over his coppery features.

There was a little hill a quarter-mile to the south. Over the crest, with infinite deliberation, crawled three dogs and a parkaed man.

Through narrowed slits of eyes the Indian watched his approach. In thirty minutes he had made a hundred yards, part of the distance, so it seemed, on hands and knees. Occasionally he ran, staggeringly, like a man drunk. Again, he would collapse and lay still.

A PECULIAR detachment came over the Indian. That the man was the policeman who had followed him from Caribou Lake he was aware, but it was in a vague fashion. The man was so weak, his efforts so ludicrously pathetic and futile, that he had ceased to be a menace. The Indian grew interested in him, speculating each time he rose just how far he would go before he fell again. And while he watched him, the Indian chewed on his caribou steaks.

To within a bare hundred yards came the policeman. Now he walked with his arms outspread, as might a man through the bush at night. Sinclair could see his open parka, the red tunic and the useless gun. Saw the sunken features, the closed eyes, and the teeth in a fearful grin.

The man paused, his head suddenly turned in a listening attitude. Then one of his dogs, catching a whiff of the cooked meat, howled whimperingly.

The sound drew Sinclair back to life. He stood up and began the packing of his sleigh. After that he hitched his train, pulled them into line, and headed them into the North.

The policeman still stood there, listening.

But the Indian did not go far. Fifty yards away he yelled to his dogs, yanked on the headline and pulled them to a stop. Once more his gaze traveled to the man behind.

He was beginning to move again. It was agony to watch him. He blundered, tripped, tried to shield his sightless eyes with his arms, and fell heavily. Five minutes he was down; then again he struggled to his knees, only to hang there swaying.

Sinclair suddenly swore, a mixture of oaths of five languages.

"Sacre Nom! Why do they do it? They have nothing to gain and everything to lose. Him now — snowblind, starved, half his dogs dead, traveling on . . . what? Bah!"

He shrugged.

He picked up the headline and the whip, but made no move to start. The parkaed figure was down again — unmoving, except that the shoulders of him were rising and falling spasmodically, the actions of a man torn by racking sobs.

Sinclair broke into a torrent of abuse, directed mostly at himself.

"I am a dam' fool," he raved in English. "Dat man he keel me eef he get half a chance; he shoot me lak a dog and laugh 'bout eet. But, *Sacre Nom!* I no can go and leave heem dere. . . . I can't do eet! I am bigger fool that ever was!"

And to prove his words, Joe Sinclair turned in his tracks.

THE man might have been dead for all the response he gave to the shaking. Sinclair rolled him on his back, and frowning, looked down at him. He was not Benton. Too young. Yet he had Benton's face. Strange, mused the Indian,

that two policemen could look so much alike.

But there was little time for speculation. The killing cold had the white man in its grasp. White spots, big as the palm of a hand, were on each cheek. There was another showing beneath the blond stubble on his chin. The Indian lugged him onto his sleigh, covered him with his rabbit-robe. The three dogs from the policeman's sleigh he turned loose. They could become wolf again and rustle for themselves. He gave them each a hunk of caribou meat to start them on their way.

Two miles to the south was a jack-pine bluff and dry wood. Later, when he had the policeman stretched out for examination, the Indian shook his head. The man was snowblind and unconscious. Worse, his legs were frozen to the knees.

While he rubbed the limbs with handsful of powdery snow, he muttered:

"I am dam' fool. He keel me eef he can. An' I do deese!"

That night, when the crystal-cold stars came out, Joe Sinclair headed once more for the south.

Five times the sun rose and set, and behind the yellow swirl of the storm came a man and a string of dogs.

The dogs were belly-deep in snow, panting, their breath whistling over blood-red tongues. In their van, a blanket-coated Indian floundered on huge beaver-trail snowshoes, turning his head from the needle-pointed gale that howled about him. His face was blackened and cracked by the soul-searing frost; the hunger of the last three days swayed him in his tracks.

His lips moved mumblingly as he peered through the murk.

"Caribou . . . dere must be caribou somewhere. . . ."

As if in answer, vague shadowy shapes drifted out of the nothingness of the storm.

Sinclair wheeled for his rifle; sent five shots roaring amongst them. One of the deer went to its knees, keeled over, and lay still. Another plowed in erratic circles.

The Indian did not wait. He drew out a handful of shells and began to ram them into the chamber of the gun. No matter that all the meat he needed was lying there before him, the hunger-madness had him in its grip.

His fingers fumbled, the carbine fell to the snow. He grabbed it up, fired. . . . And pitched forward on his face.

For ten minutes he lay there while the storm-devils chanted screamingly above him. Then a dog nosed him in the side. Another sobbed a mournful note. Sinclair opened his eyes at returning consciousness.

At his hand lay the carbine, the barrel split and twisted as though by giant fingers. He looked at it, and knew.

"That dam' snow," he grunted; "she plug up an' bust."

Weaker now than ever he crawled to his knees, wiped the blood that streamed from his head, and bound up the gash with a ragged silk scarf. Then with a sheath-knife he hacked off a quarter of the caribou-meat and again fed the entrails to the dogs.

The famished huskies fell on them, slavering and fighting amongst themselves. The Indian watched them, a sardonic smile on his lips, and at last drove them away. Then he headed again into the jaws of the storm.

Over his shoulder he looked at the carcass in the snow.

"I cache dat," he muttered, "teel I com' back."

A bitter smile suddenly twisted his mouth.

"Yeah . . . teel I com' back," he repeated, sneeringly.

The storm swallowed him up.

"I DON'T like this weather, sir. The kid know his stuff, but he started off with practically no grub." Sergeant Benton rubbed one moist hand with the palm of another.

Superintendent Gans nodded gravely. "But it's no good worrying. He may have fine weather where he is."

The sergeant, a constable, the O. C. and his half-breed dogdriver clustered around the pot-bellied stove in the Police shack at Caribou Lake. The O. C. had that day arrived on his semi-annual trip of inspection.

"He'll get him, anyway," continued Gans. "If anybody can nail Sinclair, it's that boy of yours. He'll rustle grub along the road, somewhere."

Gans stopped abruptly. There was a scuffling of moccasins, a crash at the door.

. . . Into the room stepped the ice-sheeted figure of Joe Sinclair.

As one, the three policemen were on their feet, stunned by the dramatic entry. Then Benton found his voice.

"You . . . *Joe!*"

His eyes traveled to the revolver hanging on the wall, tantalizingly out of reach.

Sinclair followed the glance, grinned mockingly.

"Go on, shoot eef you lak. I'm got no gun."

The O. C.'s face set in bafflement. "What's this?" he marked. "Giving yourself up?"

Again that sneering smile. "No. I'm geeve up anoder man. Com' and see."

The Indian turned toward the door. Watching for treachery the three policemen followed him. At the sleigh they stopped.

"What 've you got here?" yelled Gans above the howl of the storm.

"A man. I find heem up d' trail. Freeze hees feet."

The officer ran exploring fingers over the robe, then turned to the others.

"It's all right, I guess. Here, lend a hand."

Between them they carried the bundle into the cabin and laid it on one of the bunks. Benton stripped back the robe, looked down, and gave a hoarse gasp.

"Billy!"

"He's all right," said the Indian. "But watch hees feet."

For some moments there was silence as the men examined the figure on the bunk. Gans spoke at last.

"His pulse is strong. Ought to make the grade." Suddenly, he wheeled. "What happened here?"

Sinclair sketched in the past. "And," he concluded, "eef I leave heem dere, he croak sure. So I breeing heem back."

Not a man in the place spoke. Gans grew red in the face; redder. Suddenly, he exploded.

"B—but, hang it, man! Is this all you came back for?"

"Well?" taunted Sinclair.

"Good Lord! Aren't we looking for you?" spluttered Gans. "Haven't we fifty warrants out for your arrest?

Sinclair shrugged his wide shoulders.

"Well, what you do eef you find heem?"

There was no answer to the question. The policemen looked at the man before them—at the broad, storm-scarred face drawn with hunger and fatigue, at the black sloe-eyes level and unafraid, at the bandaged head and tattered blanket coat. Then:

"This is the very devil of a note," growled the O. C., and glared at his subordinates.

STEALTHILY the Indian's toe went out, encircling the table-leg. On the table was a lamp. One sharp jerk and the table and lamp went crashing to the floor, plunging the shack with darkness.

"Show a light, *quick!*" Gans' bull-like voice as he threw himself on a shadowy outline in the door-frame. . . . A roar from Benton. . . . Then the sounds of terrific combat being carried out on the floor. Suddenly, Craig, the constable, sprayed the cabin with blinding light from an electric lamp.

"You!" from Benton.

"You!" from Gans.

Outside there came a thin mocking laugh, the crack of a whip, and the sharp yelp of a dog.

"What d'you mean getting in my way?" roared Gans.

"Whose way?" retorted the sergeant. "And what'ja go glomming me for?"

"I saw him making a getaway," bawled the Superintendent, "and I made a dive for him. Thought I'd got him, too, but it must have been you." He paused; swallowed hard. "But don't stand gawping there. Get another lamp and let's see something. Every minute you waste, Sinclair's getting farther away. The Lord knows if you'll ever catch him now."

Benton opened wide eyes.

"You mean—you mean that you thought I was *him?*"

Gans grew red in the face.

"What the devil are you asking fool questions for? Didn't I say so?"

In the darkness, beyond the reach of the torch, Benton smiled to himself.

"Yeh," he muttered. "You did, in a pig's ear! But, old timer, I'll always love you for it!"

STALKER OF THE HELL-PACK

By OWEN FINBAR

Illustrations by M. Lincoln Lee

A COMPLETE SNOWLAND NOVEL

STALKER OF THE HELL-PACK

By OWEN FINBAR

It was a long grim trail that Jim Bentley followed. He had sought five men. Two he drove into the law's arms, two to the grave—and vengeance instinct told him that the fifth and last was near.

JIM BENTLEY reached for the six-shooter he wore inside his snow-whitened parka. His lean-jawed face was hard, and in his eye was a bitter gleam. He had stopped his sledge in the steeply sloping white-clad cemetery of Shuyak, with its three-barred Russian crosses marking the resting places of Aleuts, and its rude plain slabs labeling sourdoughs.

On one of these slabs that looked newly set up, and with snow flurrying over the freshly laid rock, Jim Bentley leveled his six-shooter and fired six cracking shots. The reports were muffled in the haze of thickly falling snow that almost obscured the lofty white peaks of the peninsular ranges above him. But each of the heavy slugs struck the short slab, smashing it askew.

"Only thing I'm sorry for is I didn't get yuh myself, instead of runnin' you into the hands of the posse that drilled you," muttered the tall, young sourdough, bitterly. "It would have been a pleasure, a real pleasure, to settle with you. Well, there's one more of your pack left, now. And here's hopin' I can take the last man myself."

Calling to his gray-furred wolf-dogs, he mushed swiftly away up-slope among the sighing alders and vanished in the snow-hazed gloom. Hours later, he was far above the settlement and entering a narrow pass over the peninsular hog-back.

As he drove through that mighty wilderness, the rugged splendor of the ranges insensibly subdued his black mood. When the gloom of his unrelenting search was off his shoulders, his lean, hard face was lighted by the laughing smile in his blue eyes and his mop of sun-faded reddish-brown hair added to his general appearance as a gentleman who didn't care whether school kept or not.

He even began to whistle, softly, gaily, careless of the sharp cold that pervaded the frozen slopes. Close on all sides loomed the peaks, lofty, bleak, deserted, a titanic blizzard-scarred barrier between the heaving Pacific and the black waters of the Bering Sea.

Suddenly a rifle-shot broke the afternoon stillness of the granite-walled pass through which he was mushing. The rip-rap of the high-powered weapon slapped along the black snow-cowled cliffs and away in rising echoes. Then silence fell again. That shot had come from close at hand.

Bentley jerked up the heavy rifle on his battens, held it ready; nothing happened. Nothing was in sight on the crooked, hard-packed trail. He rounded a mass of broken rock and came in sight of a man lying dead on the snow. Dogs and a sledge were to one side among the alders.

BENTLEY'S gaze roved about. Nothing moved on that expanse of snow and granite except the rustling alders on the slope to his right. Ahead all was still, frozen, silent. The dead man lay on his back, shot through the head. Blood

Bentley caught a sharp click—the sound of a gun-hammer going back. His gun roared out.

welled over his red fox-fur coat. Near him on the trail were a few bits of alder brush, a few leaves.

Bentley went ahead of his own dogs lolling in the snow, regardless of the danger of another rifle-shot from the brush. Yet he kept his weapon ready as he went to the dead man. After a moment he turned to the latter's dogs and sledge, and inspected the outfit keenly.

He crossed the road, saw a few more bits of green alder clinging to the lead-dog's fur, glanced downward frowning at the snow. That hard surface was difficult to read, yet it seemed as though the dead man had emerged from the alder thicket—to meet a bullet. The trail was in sight for only a short distance in either direction, at this point.

"Pretty queer, for a fact," muttered the young fox-ranches. "Hard-faced old fellow—"

"Up!"

The sharp curt word drove in upon Bentley's thought, full of menace. Even before turning to see whence it came, he obeyed the command. He was no rattle-headed young man, Mr. Bentley wasn't. He knew when to do as he was told. He lifted his hands, letting his rifle fall into the snow at his muklukclad feet.

On the trail, coming from the gap before him, appeared a man in black sable coat and whipcords. In his hands he held a leveled .30-.30 covering Bentley. The newcomer was a grizzled, bearded man of about fifty, with a sheriff's star gleaming within his partly opened coat. Now, seeing his command obeyed, he came on more quickly.

"Got you redhanded, didn't I?" he observed, grimly. He was a man of hard, rangy features and his face was unpleasant to look at. "Dead to rights."

"Looks that way, only it ain't," returned young Bentley, cheerfully. "I come along right after this fellow was dropped, and was looking things over."

"Yeah, it looks a lot that way, don't it?" retorted the sheriff sarcastically. "Who are you, fellow?"

"Name's Jim Bentley, age twenty-three, sex male, business raisin' blue foxes, last place of residence Unga over in the Shumagin Islands; at present lookin' for a job elsewhere, not particular where or what so long as it ain't codfishin'."

The catalog was rattled off by Mr. Bentley with a highly cheery and confident manner, but the sheriff glowered darkly on him.

"How come you to shoot Alf Molker here?"

"Didn't," retorted Bentley. "Alf came through the alders, to judge by the sign, and mushed out onto the trail right here in the pass. I've heard this is a toll pass, and it looks like Alf was tryin' to beat the toll. Anyway, he stopped a bullet first pop out of the box. 'Most likely you shot him."

"Yeah, most likely," sneered the sheriff. "I been up the other side of the gap till right now, so that don't hold water. You're under arrest, gent. A driftin' fox-lay hand, huh?"

The situation looked bad.

"Yeah, drifters get blamed for anything," said Bentley, and chuckled. "Look over my .30-.30, sheriff—ain't been fired. You know well enough I didn't do it. I guess you know who did, for that matter."

"Rifles can be cleaned," grunted the sheriff. He did not deign to notice the final remark. "You come over here and I'll take that sixgun you're packin'. You'll have to mush along with me."

BENTLEY stepped toward the sheriff, hands in air. His carefree smile had vanished now.

"I told you I didn't do it, sheriff, and you know it good and well," he snapped. He paused. His arms were high. The sheriff's rifle was thrust down almost into his indignant face. The hammer of the weapon was back. "Why are you tryin' to pin all this on me, huh? Smells like codfish to me, sheriff."

"Does it?" retorted the sheriff, eying him menacingly. "I'll tell you why, fellow. Because I was over to the Shumagins last fall, that's why. And I know you're a durned liar. You're Bentley, all right, but you're the gent that was mixed up in that there fox-raisers' and codfishermen's war and got three good men hung. I know that there mug of yours a mile away."

"Oh, yeah?" Bentley looked at him

fixedly. "Don't that sort o' give you away, sheriff?"

The bearded man with the rifle snarled across at him.

"Never mind that. You ain't going to live long enough to do no talking. I'll just take that sixgun of yours right now."

The sheriff leaned forward, reaching down his left hand for Bentley's forty-four. A look of horrified comprehension broke on Bentley's face.

"Sheriff, you ain't goin' to arrest me, honest?" he whined.

"Inch around there, turn your left side toward me," snapped the sheriff.

Bentley turned as ordered, then moved like a flash. He plunged forward, caught the barrel of the sheriff's high-powered rifle and jerked it aside as it cracked viciously. The sheriff let go, grabbing for his sixgun. He leveled it, sheer murder flaming in his eyes, contorting his harsh features. But Bentley's own gun snapped up and roared, spatting red fire over the white snow.

As if hurled about by a terrific blow, the sheriff reeled, then fell and lay prone on his face, his right hand outflung still clutching his smoking forty-five. His dogs on the trail growled, looking on curiously.

Bentley shook his head and gasped, "Meant only to wing yuh, sheriff. But you was set to kill me and I had to stop you right or you'd have done it."

Bentley knew the man was dead. He stooped for a moment, picked up the sheriff's rifle, looked it over and laid it down again. Only one shot had been fired with it—that one at him. He went over to the body of Alf Molker, pulled out the man's untouched sixgun and compared it with his own. Both were ordinary forty-fours, mates. He put Molker's gun in his own holster, dropped his own weapon on the snow beside Molker.

Then he released the dogs of both the sheriff and the other dead man, trailed them behind his sledge and mushed on through the pass.

A mile below on a bight of the trail showed a house, white walled, red roofed, with a fence and a gate cutting across the way. This was the toll-house, where a fee was collected for the privilege of passing through the gap by some one who had patented rights to the canyon.

Bentley's face was grim now, his eyes were alert and reflective.

"Feller that shot Molker is still hidin' in the alders, maybe," he mused. "If he is, then he seen me and the sheriff. The sheriff knew me—probably was the only man on this coast who would know me. What a piece of luck! Bad luck for him. He should of had more sense than tryin' to use a rifle that way. So he aimed to rub me out, huh? Well, that shows where this here sheriff stood on this deal. And it shows I'm headin' in the right direction."

II

BENTLEY swung along the crooked trail that dropped rapidly away toward the white-mantled tundra below the ranges. Suddenly he emerged close upon the house, the white fence and gate he had seen from the mouth of the pass.

Far to the north lay outspread the snow-covered tundra country, reaching away to the black waters of the Bering Sea. It was a magnificent stretch of northern empire, cut off by the hogback of the peninsula ranges from most of the world—the Herendeen Flats. It appeared flat, too, flat as a pancake, seen from this height, and spotless with unstained snow.

Bentley had not been here before, but he knew the region none the less. Over to the left, just out of his sight, lay the town of Herendeen, the only settlement of this lonely country. The coast was given over to fox-farms. Ahead wound the trail that led to Herendeen.

"Hmm, can't make it 'fore night. Besides I may have some talkin' to do here," remarked Bentley, as he mushed up toward the house.

The door swung open and in it appeared a girlish figure. Bentley, as he stepped from his sledge, gazed with undisguised delight and interest. The young woman was perhaps twenty, but appeared older by reason of her very capable bearing and expression. Dark hair framed an eager, vibrant face; but her impulses were evidently tempered by very sound judgment. Mr. Bentley, as he removed his fur cap, told himself that here was a woman who knew how to do things.

"Howdy, ma'am," he greeted her. "My name's Jim Bentley. I'm bound for Herendeen or somewheres, but I don't expect to make it before night. Will there be any chance of me gettin' a bunk in with your men here?"

She studied him for a moment.

"I expect so," she replied. "We'll see when my brother gets back. I'm Mary Galt, and my brother Ralph will be back pretty soon. My goodness, why are you trailing all those huskies behind you—"

She broke off. Coming in from the northern slope of the trail were two men who seemed to be in some haste. They mushed up to the house and halted.

"Howdy, Miss Galt," said one. "Seen anything of Joe Wade this afternoon?"

"Why, yes," she replied. "He was driving south up into Brunn's Gap about half an hour ago."

Bentley intervened. "Was he a right big man with gray whiskers? Sheriff?"

"Yeah, that's him," said one of the sourdoughs. "Meet him?"

"I seen him," said Bentley calmly. "He ain't far—'bout a quarter mile from here, I guess. Him an' another feller. Looks like they'd shot an' killed each other. Found their dogs all snarlin' an' tanglin'. These are their huskies trailing here. Both bein' dead, I couldn't do nothin' for 'em, an' it's against th' law to move 'em till they're seen by some officer, yuh know."

WITH astonished exclamations the two sourdoughs obtained from Mr. Bentley all the information he was willing to give them concerning the double killing. Then they hastily mushed off toward the pass. The girl stood gazing at Bentley, her hazel eyes startled and wide.

"Is that true?" she demanded. "The other man—it couldn't be my—"

"I think not, ma'am," he returned. "He was an old lookin' fellow with ragged foxfurs."

Relief flooded her face. Bentley turned his dogs to the back, unharnessed and fed them from the bundle of dried salmon lashed on his sledge. He also cared for the animals he had brought in from Brunn's Gap.

Carrying his sleeping gear into the men's bunkhouse, he arranged his blankets in what was apparently a vacant bunk.

A little after that, returning to the house, he saw the two sourdoughs who had asked him about the sheriff. They were coming back, with the two bodies on their sledges. The unpleasant load was covered from sight with fur robes. The men left the handlebars of their sledges and came to Bentley. The girl was not in sight.

"Know anything about it you ain't told us already, mister?" one of them inquired, rolling a cigarette.

"Don't seem able to recollect no more," said Bentley, lightly. "Why?"

"Can't figger it nohow," declared the other. "Does look like they'd met up an' gone to shootin', all right, an' each one got the other. Hear any shootin' as you come up the gap?"

Bentley nodded. "Yep. Two, three shots. Heard 'em, all right."

The other looked him over. "Aimin' to stay around here long? I'd like to have your evidence down to town. Lawson's my name—deputy. This here is McLeeson."

Bentley smiled amiably, gave his name.

"I'll be seein' you," he continued easily. "Ain't in no hurry."

The others prepared to take their leave. McLeeson stood undecidedly, gazing at Bentley. He was a young man with dark brows and a stubby square-jawed face. The other, a slack-faced, sandy-featured fellow, finally went on to his sledge and McLeeson followed.

As they mushed off with their burdens, Mary Galt appeared at the door. Bentley looked up at her, smiling.

"Guess you don't want to make 'em pay, ma'am. Not under the circumstances, huh?"

"No, of course not," she said, and looked after the procession swinging down the trail.

MR. BENTLEY was sitting in the kitchen talking of blue-foxes and other gentle subjects with Mary Galt, when her brother Ralph showed up.

He was a man of perhaps thirty, much older than his sister, and wore a peculiar sullen expression which was at first extremely forbidding. Sizing him up, Jim Bentley felt sorry for the sister. He set down Mr. Galt as weak-kneed, stubborn,

Mary Galt hated Carmody like poison.

vindictive, generally disliked, and too proud to fight in the open. None the less, Bentley tried to make himself agreeable, and gradually thawed the other man out with his cheery disposition.

"Sure, you can bunk in the shack," said Galt, sinking down and leaning a heavy rifle against the wall. "Well, sis, what news? I didn't get that cursed coyote that's been bothering. Seen some fresh deer tracks, but didn't come in sight of anything."

"Some news," said the girl. "The sheriff was just shot and killed right up here in our gap."

Ralph turned his head slowly, and his eyes were bulging.

"Huh?" he exclaimed. "What's that? The sheriff? Not him, surely."

"Surer than that. And another fellow, too," said Bentley. "Gent name of Alf Molker. Killed each other."

For a moment Ralph Galt looked at Bentley. "By Jingo," he exclaimed. "Is that so? I ain't sorry 'bout neither of them. Wisht half this here region would kill off t'other half."

Mary Galt set about getting supper ready, and Mr. Bentley talked attentively with his host. Discovering that Ralph apparently hated everyone in sight, he was not long in probing to the cause. It seemed that the brother and sister had been left a large property by their father. It consisted of an extensive fox-lay, and this toll pass, the only gap to the north country from the Pacific side of the peninsula within a hundred miles. It was a fairly good paying proposition—the toll gap.

Hard neighbors and shiftless disposition had lost the lower fox-lay for Galt, and for the past year he and his sister had operated the toll pass up here for support. The toll feature was an unpopular thing. Insisting stubbornly on his legal rights, Galt had reached a state of virtual war with the population below. Bentley shrewdly judged that had it not been for Mary, Mr. Galt would have been run out of the region long since.

"Been a lot of trouble over on this side of the mountains, I hear," remarked Bentley, carefully. "About a fox-ranch war goin' on around here. And they say the mail-sledge's been robbed twice in the last month, and four, five men killed on account of that."

"Yeah," agreed Galt, gloomily. "The fox-ranch trouble is Carmody's doings. Him and Ed McLeeson about run th' roost around here. An' he's tryin' to git away with what really belongs to me, but he ain't goin' to, though."

"Huh?" Mr. Bentley pricked up his ears. "Meanin' no offense, how come?"

"Oh, hell! It ain't no secret." Galt seemed glad to talk, glad to get a chance to converse with someone he did not distrust and hate. "Dad left the property to me an' Mary equal, see? Well, I got to drinkin' one time and we needed cash and one thing or another, so we mortgaged my half to Carmody. He figured he'd marry Sis and have the whole outfit. Well, I got squeezed, that's all. Place wasn't worth a darn any more and Mary, she wouldn't mortgage her share, and there we are. She hates Carmody like poison, too. Carmody says let him take over the place and build it up and he'd give us half the profits. So we moved up to this end of the place and Carmody took the lay, and that's the last of it. Ain't seen no profits and won't."

"By gosh!" said Bentley, and whistled softly. "Think he's made any?"

"*Made* any?" Galt showed his teeth in a snarl. "Him and Molker—Alf Molker's his foreman and boss, or was—have got the place into swell shape. We can't get no accounting out of Carmody, though. He come over last week and joshed us. Said he's losin' money and so forth. But I know from McLeeson that he's cashin' in to beat th' band, with blues sky-high like they are and all. Him and McLeeson have a battle on of their own."

"Yeah," prompted Bentley. "So Carmody and his foreman, Molker, were bucking this fox-man, McLeeson?"

"Yep." Galt shot Bentley a sulky, scared glance that made Bentley think. "McLeeson hooked onto one of our sulphur springs on a boundary row up in Pavlof Gulch. A man's got to have warm sulphur water if he wants to raise a string of healthy blues, you know. The two fox-lays have been fightin' ever since. McLeeson against Carmody."

"That don't explain the mail-sledge robberies," said Bentley. "Fox-men makin' money don't go robbin' the mails."

"No," admitted Galt, and then delivered himself of an unexpectedly shrewd observation. "But when the big fellows have protection, when killing and rustling and burning can go on, then their men will raise hell in other directions. Some men never know when to stop."

"Right," agreed Bentley, and rose as Mary appeared with word that supper was ready.

III

THE meal was simple and delicious: roast grouse, flaky brown biscuits, aromatic coffee and preserved peaches. The interior of the cabin was most pleasant with its skin rugs, its moose-horn gun-racks and its curtained windows. But Bentley felt more than ever sorry for the girl as the meal progressed. Ralph Galt said little, lapsed into a black and sullen humor; and Bentley wondered how the girl could live with such a man if he were like this all the time.

The whimsical temper of the visitor, his laughing eyes and infectious mirth, somewhat relieved the situation and again drew Ralph out of his bad humor. He eyed Bentley wonderingly, even admiringly, while his sister wakened into merry laughter at the audacious sallies of the stranger. Within half an hour the three were old friends.

"Must be you ain't never had a care in the world, Bentley," said Ralph suddenly.

"Who, me?" Bentley looked at him, and a buttered hot biscuit stopped half way to his mouth. A queerly guilty expression slipped over his face, and the smile died on his lips.

Mary Galt gazed at him, filled with amazement and apprehension at the lightning-like glint that darted into his eyes, at the grim set of his lean jaw. Then slowly he seemed to pull himself out of this sternness.

"I—you kind of took me short, Ralph," said Bentley. "Any man's got his chores an' his troubles. Mine's not little ones. But this supper's so good, I clean forgot 'em. Yes, ma'am," he turned toward the astonished and slightly flushing girl, "if you don't mind me sayin' it, Miss Mary, your company's enough to make any man forget his worries. Besides, I don't let my troubles ride me. I ride them."

MARY smiled, but she was a little breathless, for she had sensed the steely-hard and fighting-hot interior of this stranger. Ralph Galt felt it, too, and he stared at Bentley.

"You look like a man to me, by George," he said. "If I had a fellow like you with me, I'd go up against this here bunch in Herendeen an' wipe 'em clean."

"Maybe," said Bentley. "And maybe you'd get wiped. Was the late sheriff a special friend of Carmody's?"

"Nope," said Ralph. "Him and McLeeson were cousins, so the sheriff was against Carmody. Molker was Carmody's foreman, like I just said. Guess that's how they come to kill each other."

"Anyhow, that's what everybody'll say," commented Bentley. Ralph started.

"Huh? What you mean by that?"

Bentley smiled, pushed back his chair and rolled a smoke.

"Ain't saying." His eyes met those of the girl for a moment. "Miss Galt, Ralph was telling me about you folks losing your fox-lay. I ain't aiming to interfere, but I'm sort of interested. Just how does it stand? Has Carmody got any title to it at all? What sort is he?"

"He's a rough one, able to make his own way," she returned slowly. "He grew up around here, went away, and came back a couple years ago, pretty well fixed. Been in some sort of business down at Seattle. What was it, Ralph?"

"Dunno," growled Ralph. "No telling."

"Anyhow, he had quite a lot of money when he came back." Mary Galt reddened slightly. "He bought a small outfit next

to ours. Then he and Ralph got friendly, and one thing and another happened, and—"

"Oh, he knows the straight of it," said Ralph, gloomily. "I told him already."

The girl looked relieved.

"I wanted to get a lawyer to force an accounting," she said, "but there's only one in the country and he's a relative of Carmody's. Then McLeeson wanted to force Carmody into a show-down, but I wouldn't let him."

"Ed McLeeson's courtin' her," said Ralph, bluntly. "Was, that is. Ain't now. Got his mind on a hasher over to Herendeen. Right pretty girl, I guess."

Mary flushed angrily at this comment on her personal affairs.

"I see," said Bentley, with a whimsical glance at the embarrassed girl. "Well, if you two want to take back your fox-lay, why'n blazes don't you do it?"

"We'd have to pay that thousand dollars back to Carmody first that we owe him," explained Ralph. "Ain't got it."

Bentley frowned. "You mean to say the amount was only a thousand?"

"It's a lot when you ain't got it," returned Ralph Galt. "Besides, he wouldn't give it up. We'd have to go take the place by force. That'd mean a gun-battle with him and his crew. He's got five fellows there, all of 'em bad medicine. And on top of that he's got a cook off a codfishin' schooner could whip a grizzly single-handed, and then go look for another. Maybe I didn't find out! Why, this Meat-Axe—"

"Harovich!"

BENTLEY looked at Ralph, and his eyes were suddenly sharp and steely. "Meat-Axe Harovich?"

Again the cold menace of stern and bitter resolve was harsh in Bentley's voice. Abruptly he suppressed it. With a frigid smile that gradually regained its previous warmth and cheeriness, he went on.

"Folks, you don't know me, an' I don't know what you think of me. But I got a little proposition to make you. You talk it over tonight. Got to have a yes or no tomorrow morning, because if it goes through, then we want some quick action. Always take the other gent on the jump is my motto."

"A proposition?" repeated Mary Galt.

"Yep. Pure business, too," said Bentley, briskly. He reached into his shirt and produced a small folded wallet, from which he drew several banknotes and a certified check.

"Here's the last of what I've got," he said. "Twelve hundred in banknotes and a check for fifteen hundred. Twenty-seven hundred in all. Look 'em over."

He shoved the money and the certified check across the table. Ralph looked at them. His sister gazed at the stranger, and her dark eyes were very level and cool, almost suspicious.

"I sure didn't aim to do this when I came here," said Bentley, lighting his cigarette and breaking the match. "But I gamble a lot on folks. More'n I do on facts, to tell the truth. I ain't asked any proof of your story. I believe it. My proposition is to turn this money into the jackpot. You pay off that mortgage and do it before the commissioner in Herendeen, early in the morning. Then you and me will mush over and throw Carmody off the lay, and Mary can come along about tomorrow night. There's plenty dogs here now, I guess."

Galt stared at Bentley, gaped with jaw fallen.

"My gosh, fellow," he exclaimed, handing back the money and the check. "You talk like it was five minutes' work to throw Carmody out."

"Won't be nothing after it's done," and Bentley chuckled. "Ain't finished my proposition yet. There's seventeen hundred after the mortgage is paid off. Keep it. I'll have a third interest, each of you a third. The only joker is that I'm to be manager. I'm running the lay; my word goes. I ain't aiming to override you, but I'm good and I know it, and I aim to run whatever business my money is put into. There you are, folks. Well, ma'am?"

MARY GALT'S eyes were glowing, and color was rising in her cheeks.

"It's too good to be true," she exclaimed, then checked herself. "But you're on some long trail of your own, Mr. Bentley, and—"

"Jim, ma'am—"

"All right, Jim. As I was saying, you've got a purpose up your sleeve in mushing

through here to the Bering coast. I don't know what that purpose is, but I know it's there. You can smile and laugh, and kid Ralph and me along, but underneath you're bitter and hard as steel—oh, I can see it. And as long as that is so, what chance is there of your being content to settle down here in this place and look after a fox-lay?"

"Every chance in the world—now," he said enigmatically; and if for an instant his words brought a glint of anger to her eyes, it fled as he went on.

"You see, you got me sized up as a man with a smoky job ahead of him. Well, you might be right, but I don't have to go hunting any further. I've found the man I'm looking for, I guess."

"What?" She paled swiftly. "You mean—oh, the half savage codfisherman! Carmody's cook?"

Bentley shook his head and puffed at his cigarette before replying.

"Nope. He's in on the game, though. His being here shows the man I want is here also. They run together. Where there's Ike there's Mike. Let that rest until later. You see, it looks like this is a lucky break all around. Let my proposition wait till morning. You two talk it over when I ain't around to influence you, and if you don't like the notion of it, then no hard feelings. But listen to one thing, Ralph. If you say yes, then tomorrow you got to keep up with me. An' keepin' up with Jim Bentley is a man's job. Well, now let's forget it an' help Mary wash up these dishes. I ain't puttered around a real kitchen for a long while."

MARY protested but Bentley smiled away her objections. Ralph Galt, wide awake now and inclined to be feverishly excited over Bentley's proposal, lent a willing hand, and in no time at all everything was shipshape.

Mary spoke of a magnificent view of the lower slopes of the region from the front windows of the house, on the few nights when there was moonlight to reveal them.

"Though," she added, "I don't know that you care much for views."

"But you think I do, eh?" Bentley chuckled. "Mary, you've got me at a disadvantage."

"How so?" she inquired.

"'Cause I'm right scared to make you mad. I like you folks a whole lot. As a rule, I plow straight ahead with whatever comes into my mind. But if I like anybody, then I sure don't want to get 'em mad. So I'm walkin' on eggs where speech is concerned."

"And why," she said, laughing, "are your thoughts so terrible you don't dare utter them?"

"They're mighty risky," said Bentley, emboldened by the darkness around. "Yes, awful risky. For a plumb stranger to up and say that you were a mighty wonderful sort o' girl and that he saw things in your eyes he hadn't thought to see in anybody's eyes—why, you'd most likely feel riled. So I ain't saying anything like that at all."

"Hm!" said the girl, after a moment. "Things that are said for effect depend on who says them and how, don't they? Yes, I expect you better watch your tongue, Jim. It might run you into trouble, for a fact. But, mercy: I'd better go get that room ready. You're staying in the house with us, you know."

Mary Galt departed. The two men sat for a space in silence.

"Use your rifle any today, Ralph?" demanded Bentley, presently.

"Uh-huh. Didn't hit nothing, though."

"I s'pose you're tryin' to figure out how'n hell Alf Molker killed the sheriff after Molker was already dead, huh?"

Ralph emitted a startled sound that might have been a low gasp, as he caught the import of these words.

"Meanin' what, Bentley?"

"Well, I ain't any fool, and I'm pretty good at readin' sign," said Bentley, calmly.

"So'm I, for that matter," said Ralph, in the darkness. "An' I know darned well the sheriff wasn't killed by Molker, and it's a cinch he didn't kill himself."

Bentley chuckled quietly and let it stand that way, with which Ralph, seemingly, was more than content. Bentley had pretty definitely learned what he wanted to know, however. Ralph Galt had got larger game than coyotes that afternoon. And from Bentley's viewpoint, he had not got that game in any upstanding manfashion. Had it not been for the sister, he would not have thought for a moment of mushing out in the morning with Ralph

Galt for a partner. He noted a lack of stamina, and it made him uneasy.

The talk ended there, for soon Mary came with word that a room was ready for Bentley.

He was asleep almost before he hit the white linen sheets and the white pillow, luxuries he had not known for a very long time.

IV

WHEN Bentley awakened, it was still dark, and Ralph Galt was shaking him.

"Come alive, partner," said Ralph. "Mary's gettin' breakfast. I'll be trailin' out the dogs, and we're headin' down to Herendeen together."

"The proposition's good, is it?" asked Bentley, as he sat up.

"Yes, sir! We'll cover your bet, fellow. Fly at it."

When Bentley had shaved and put on his clothes, he came into the kitchen and found Mary setting a platter of golden-brown hotcakes on the table. She turned a face that was both radiant and anxious toward him.

"Good morning, Jim. Well, we've accepted. And I do hope it'll come out all right."

"Probably will," he returned cheerfully. "Gosh, them hotcakes smell awful good. An' honey an' butter. Me, I go for honey like a regular bear."

"One thing—" she came close to him, dropped her voice, "keep Ralph away from liquor if you want things to go right. He can't handle it at all."

"It's a promise," said Jim Bentley.

An hour later, the two men were nearing the settlement. Herendeen had started out with no intention of being a town in the first place. Nor had it ever succeeded in being anything but a double row of ugly weather-blackened shacks with a large court-house and jail, a trading-store, several saloons, and nothing much else. The settlement fringed the arc of an inlet where the water now lay ice-sludged, grayish white, with two or three schooners of doubtful character in the bight.

As they swung down the white crooked street, Ralph Galt suggested they start the day's activities with a drink.

"No," said Bentley, promptly. "We gotta keep our heads, partner. The wrong move will gum things up, an' we can't afford to get caught napping today. I guess we can go dry a day or so. Is the fox-lay in your name or Mary's?"

"In Mary's, what's left of it," said Ralph.

"Then we'll clean off the mortgage before the commissioner, and leave him to keep the balance of this money in his safe."

The two men left their dogs in front of the court-house and stood talking there. A few sourdoughs passed, nodded to Ralph and flung curious glances at the tall young stranger.

"We need a few hands, I guess," said Bentley. "Know anybody we can get?"

Ralph Galt considered. "Nope, not right here an' now. And if we find Carmody's outfit around the bunkshacks we're goin' to wish we had a lot of fellers with us."

"They won't be there. Now, old-timer, you let me do the talking when we arrive," said Bentley. "You're liable to show you're mad, an' I don't show it until I shoot. And the first shot is going to make a whole lot o' difference."

"Think there'll be shootin', huh?" grunted Ralph.

"Sure," said Bentley, cheerfully. "I didn't want to scare Mary about it, though. Who'll be sheriff, now that the other is gone?"

"His deputy, I guess," said Ralph. "He's a no-account fellow name of Lawson. You've already met him."

"That's right," said Bentley. "I'll trot in and see him at the sheriff's hangout down the street there. Come over for me soon as you get through here with the commissioner and have your papers from him."

BENTLEY went down the street, heading for the jail and sheriff's office, which was some way from the court-house.

The new acting sheriff was alone in the office, dazedly struggling through some mail that had come in by sledge. He was not a gentleman of gigantic intellect, obviously; in fact, it was locally stated that Lawson could not even hit a spittoon once out of five shots. He was lanky, sandy,

unshaven, and considerably soiled about the edges. Being conscious of the fact that he was held in small respect, he was ready enough to cover this up by biggety talk and a hard-boiled manner.

"Hullo," said Bentley, walking in. "You're acting as sheriff now, eh, Lawson?"

"Yep," said Lawson, eying him.

"Well, you saw me yesterday. I said I'd show up and see if any evidence was wanted."

Lawson swung his chair around.

"Set down, Bentley," he said. "I guess we don't need any evidence. Thing was all clear enough. Sheriff gets buried today. Couple miners blasting through the frozen ground now. Goin' to stay around here?"

"Sure am," said Bentley, and drew a paper from his pocket. It was an agreement written out and signed that morning between himself and the Galts. "You might look over this."

Mr. Lawson did so, and his jaw fell.

"Great Scott! You're partners with Ralph Galt, huh? And aim to take over Carmody's fox-lay?"

"Aim to take over Galts', you mean—yep." Bentley rolled a smoke and smiled brightly at the sheriff. "And we also intend to have you come along with us, just to make sure Carmody and his outfit don't start no battle. Ralph will be along in a minute with the papers showing his mortgage is paid off and all clear. We expect to serve them on Carmody and take the place back, since he's got no title to it."

"GOOD lord, fellow!" Sheriff Lawson was no relative of McLeeson, who was at war with Carmody, but he seemed to dislike Carmody just as much and to relish the idea of seeing Carmody flung off the Galt property. "You got a program, all right—but I dunno it's legal. Carmody's got that there place, and he ain't a feller to let loose so easy. You got a court order?"

Bentley grinned.

"Ralph's gettin' that with the other papers. And I'm a partner now in that lay. I'm runnin' it. Carmody's got no shadow of right there, and he's refused any accounting. I'm grabbing the whole works, and he'll come a-runnin' with his tongue hangin' out to get the accounting done, soon's I got the place. Now I have a lot of respect for sheriffs, and I'd like to have you along with us. Being a stranger here, I sort of want you to keep your eye on things and see that I ain't starting any fight."

"No," said Lawson, sarcastically. "Oh, hell no, you ain't starting nothin' except a free-for-all gun-war, if you aim to throw Carmody off his fox-lay. Dunno had I ought to go along or not—"

"You're the new sheriff," said Bentley, and through the door saw Ralph Galt coming along the plank sidewalk. "Looks like you ought to take the chance to make yourself felt and seen around here."

"By jeevers, that's right," said Lawson. "All right, I'll do it. Hello, Ralph."

"Hullo," said Ralph, entering.

"Bentley wants me to ride out with you fellows and keep the peace," said Lawson. "When you going?"

"Right now," replied Bentley, with a wink at Galt. "Want to get there before noon, so there won't be too much of a crowd on hand. Mortgage all squared, Ralph?"

"Yep." Galt produced the document. "Guess I'd better burn it."

"Save it and show it to Carmody along with the commissioner's release order," and Bentley chuckled. "It'll surprise him a lot. Got a sledge and dogs handy, sheriff?"

"Give me five minutes," said Lawson. "Better have a drink before we start."

"Nope, we ain't drinkin', not on a trip like this," said Bentley, easily. "Afterward, sure!"

IN ten minutes, the three men were heading out of Herendeen, their sledge-runners whining over the white trail that skirted the seacoast to the westward. To the fox-lay held by Carmody was a drive of several miles.

As the men mushed abreast on the hard crust of the snow, Lawson talked across to the others a good deal. He was a garrulous man, anxious to impress Bentley with his importance. He was feeling his new office as a chance to impress everybody, a chance to redeem the former contempt in which he had been held by the world at large. He talked about everyone

"Yeah, but who'll I stick in jail?" Lawson demanded.

and everything he knew. Bentley was not long in comprehending the man, and chuckled to himself.

"I guess your good qualities," he said to Lawson, "have been sort of overshadowed by the lamented sheriff, ain't it so? Folks probably depended on him, and you were just the deputy and nobody give a damn about you. Now that you're fillin' out his term—by gosh, you know what? If you was to start out your first day in office by clapping some tough gents in jail, you'd make yourself felt. Yes, sir! There'd be no mistake at all about who's sheriff now around this region."

Lawson warmed hugely to this idea. "Yeah, but who'll I stick in jail?" he demanded, with an eager grin.

"Well," said Bentley, off-handedly, "you might get hold of some of the mail-sledge robbers around here. I understand there's been a lot of law breakin'. Now, if the late sheriff never done a thing about it, and you were to start out—gosh! You'd be made for life. Or if you were to show yourself strong enough to get hold of some gunman or other. S'pose one of Carmody's outfit tries to pull a gun on me and I beat him up and you arrest him."

"Yeah," snorted Lawson. "Fat chance. Any time one of that bunch goes for a gun, there ain't no beatin-up done. There's a burial."

"Well, wait and see," said Bentley. "You play your game and I'll play mine."

"You bet," said Lawson. "But about them bandits, nobody knows who they are. If I knew, by jeevers I'd go after them."

Bentley judged that the man meant his words. Lawson had been too small fry to be included in any actual knowledge of anything crooked going on. Now that he was abruptly raised to a place of power and responsibility, he was fired by a strong and righteous desire to show what was in him, or what he thought was in him. And if well used, such a man might be of utmost value.

The closer they came to the big fox-lay held by Carmody, however, the less Sheriff Lawson talked and the more heartily did he agree that Bentley should be the chief actor in whatever might take place.

Ralph Galt, however, grew darker and more somber of mood, the nearer they came to his old home. Watching him narrowly, Bentley knew that here was his chief danger point. Ralph might explode into anything—as he had probably exploded the previous afternoon at sight of Alf Molker, who had doubtless driven through the alders around the toll-house rather than stop and pay.

Molker's body was now in town awaiting burial when graves had been blasted into the frozen earth, and Bentley had shrewdly figured that Carmody's outfit would not assemble at their bunkhouses before noon, to mush in for the ceremony. They probably would get in a morning's work in the fox-runs and take the afternoon and night off.

The three sourdoughs were topping a sharp rise, just beyond which the fox-lay to which they were bound would come into view, when abruptly a man appeared on a narrow ledge, mushing swiftly down the trail toward them.

"There's luck," said Lawson. "That's Carmody now."

"Ralph," said Bentley, quietly, "you keep yourself in hand, see? If there's any shootin' done here, I'll do it."

V

CARMODY was evidently not overjoyed at the sight of the three. He was a powerfully muscled man who looked more than his real age because of a square-clipped brown beard that accentuated the masterful lines of his broad face. He was plainly a man accustomed to having his own way; his reddish brown eyes were heavy, dominant, penetrating. They touched on Lawson's star, went to Ralph Galt, and then gripped on Bentley, who was in the lead. Carmody was suspicious.

"Hullo." Bentley halted his sledge, and after Carmody nodded to the others, gave his name.

"I've bought an interest in Galt's fox-lay," he said curtly. "Galt, here, has paid off the mortgage you hold and brought it along to show you. We've come to take possession."

Carmody was thunderstruck. His eyes widened and a savage flame grew and blazed in them as Galt handed him the mortgage. He glanced at it, then crumpled it in his powerful fist and dropped it.

"What sort of joke is this?" he demanded, and shot a threatening glance at Lawson. "What game you playin'?" Bentley got out the makings. Deftly he began to manufacture a smoke as he moved apparently without definite purpose and came close to Carmody.

"Ain't no joke," said Bentley, amiably. "Y'see, Carmody, you've refused any accounting and so you're movin'. Now it's us who'll give the accounting. I figure to run this lay right and make some money with it."

Ignoring the other two, Carmody fastened his attention on Bentley, rightly judging that this was the man he had to reckon with.

"Ain't you bit off a considerable bite?" he asked in a low and menacing tone.

"Shucks, no!" Bentley grinned and began to roll the cigarette. He was apparently quite at his ease, unconscius of any tension in the air. He moved slightly again, closer to Carmody's right side. "You see, I figure that a fellow knows when he's beat, and you ain't fool enough to buck a sure thing."

"Is that so?" grunted Carmody, his eyes narrowed, hard, sinister now.

"Sure." Bentley laughed easily, licked the cigarette, and pinched the end with critical approval. His careless air was tempting in the extreme. Probably Carmody decided he was dealing with someone who could be bluffed out, and he determined to carry off the matter with a high hand.

WITHOUT warning, Carmody's hand slid to his gun and he jerked out the weapon.

But, swift as a flash, Bentley's lean hand flew to Carmody's wrist, caught and gripped it in iron fingers before he could even point up. Carmody snarled; there was a crashing report as the gun exploded. Bentley's grip kept it pointing downward and the slug plowed into the snow with a savage white spurt.

Bentley with a swift move wrenched the gun out of Carmody's hand, struck him a sharp cracking blow under the chin that sent him back onto his haunches.

"Now be a good boy," said Bentley, calmly, to the harshly cursing man on the snow. "Gents like you hadn't ought to monkey with sixguns. Sheriff, I guess you got to arrest this man for assault with a deadly weapon. I'll swear out the warrant when we get back to town. Give me them handcuffs you brought along."

Carmody turned a purpled face toward the sheriff and cursed blackly, threatening him. But Lawson had just seen the mighty humbled, and was already thinking of what a figure he would cut, fetching Carmody to jail. He tossed the steel bracelets to Bentley, who deftly wrenched the arms of Carmody around and pinioned him, despite his struggles, curses, and threats. Ralph had meanwhile untangled the snarling dogs and was now looking on in utmost astonishment.

It was a pardonable emotion. Of himself, Sheriff Lawson would never have dared to arrest Carmody, but Bentley had prepared him to arrest somebody, and Bentley here had done all the work. Thus backed up, Lawson was full of pride and delight, and all the threats of Carmody slid off him like water off a duck. Arms behind him, Carmody was put onto his own sledge, and Bentley used some of the fox-man's own spare harness thongs to tie his feet to the battens.

"Can't take no chances with a jigger who'd pull a gun like that," he declared, with a wink at the sheriff.

"Blast your dirty hide," sneered Carmody, deadly pale now under his mask of dirt and beard. "I'll get you for this and get you quick. This fool of a sheriff won't have me in jail an hour, if he ever gets me there. And when I get out, Bentley, Lord help you!"

"NEVER mind about me bein' a fool, Carmody," cut in Lawson, proudly. "You and a few more jaspers around here are due to learn a few things, and you can bear in mind that I'm sheriff now of Herendeen and I aim to stay so. And you don't need to be so sure of what you're goin' to do, unless you want a murder charge laid onto you."

Carmody shot him one savage look, and said no more, but his bloodshot eyes were eloquent. Bentley looked at the prisoner for a moment.

"I guess you made a mistake, gent," he said slowly, his voice very cold. "Now, before we go on, let's you and me settle a little something. And lemme tell you, if you figure to get to Alf Molker's funeral this afternoon, you talk turkey. Because if you don't, I'll sure as hell have to put a bullet into you.

In these icy words, in the eyes of the man behind them, Carmody sensed an unguessed peril and reacted to it. He was far from being a fool.

"What you want?" he growled.

"I suppose you were down to Seattle three years ago in July?" demanded Bentley.

"Yes." Carmody's eyes held his gaze steadily. "What's it to yuh?"

"It's this to you," said Bentley in a flat, tense voice. "Was Meat-Axe Harovich with you down there?"

"Meat-Axe? My cook? Why, no!" Carmody frowned, puzzled. "Picked him up when I came back here. Him and two, three more men, and they been with me since."

Bentley met his gaze for a long moment, felt truth in his reply. And in Bentley's eyes flashed a look of regret, deepening to bitter disappointment. Then slowly his lean face set grim and stern with renewed resolve.

"All right," he said quietly. "Then never mind about it."

Carmody cursed again. "I s'pose McLeeson's put you up to all this, eh?"

Bentley's grimness lightened. He chuckled and replied, "Not him. Well, Ralph, let's go take over our fox-lay."

THE sheriff drove along with his prisoner. Lawson had wanted to head for Herendeen with Carmody, but at Bentley's suggestion changed his mind and trailed on to the fox-lay instead.

"Great scott!" said Ralph in a low voice. "I'd never of believed it."

Bentley chuckled again.

He could understand why a low groan broke from Ralph Galt as they drew closer to the fox-lay and could distinguish details. He knew why Ralph mushed up with smoldering eyes and tightly clenched lips, as if not daring to say anything less he burst forth in rage. Now that the incredible had happened, now that Carmody was humbled and his partner was driving cheerfully to new triumphs, Ralph Galt was becoming more cocky and confident of a sudden.

Under Carmody's hand the place had become distinctly a bachelor layout, with no attempt toward keeping up appearances. The whole fox-lay bore an air of being left to shift for itself as far as possible with all attention given to getting as much out of it with as little effort and expense as possible.

The corral fencings were rusting, feed-sheds and house unpainted. All that had been in neat repair was now blistering in places. The windows were bare of curtains. A pile of empty cans reposed outside the kitchen door, and the general air of careless neglect was everywhere to be seen.

By the bunkhouse and the feed-shed, one man was in sight, working over a mixture of mash for young animals.

From the kitchen door gazed out another man, a swarthy fellow whom Bentley knew must be the cook. He turned on Carmody.

"Now," he said, "you let out one yap and you'll get your teeth bashed in. See? Look after him, Ralph. Don't make any half-way business of it. Give him your gun-barrel over his jaw if he says a word.

Lawson, s'pose you and me go on in there and do the talking." Nothing loath, Lawson turned over his prisoner to Ralph Galt and strode on with Bentley.

"This codfisherman is a bad one," he said warningly, and Bentley nodded, but made no reply.

VI

AT their approach, Harovich stiffened from his slouched posture in the door, hitched forward his guns holstered from a greasy black belt, and waited. He was a bony-limbed man, extremely savage and dark of aspect, with a hard fearlessness in his bearing. His Tartar strain showed in the slightly yellowish hue of his dark skin.

Sight of the sheriff, the stranger and Ralph Galt, with Carmody seated on a sledge in obvious constraint, must have shown him instantly that something was wrong. He nodded shortly to Lawson and then transferred all his attention to Bentley.

"Howdy," said Bentley, levelly, and gave his name. "You're Harovich, huh? This here fox-lay has changed hands, mister. Your boss is under arrest and you're free to pack your gear, if you got any, and be on your way. But first I got something to ask you."

Harovich stood motionlessly, gazing at the other. Slowly he proceeded to roll a cigarette. But his black treacherous eyes were gleaming and watchful.

"What man came over to this region with you?" demanded Bentley, curtly. Harovich started, regarded the young newcomer steadily, his eyes closing to slits.

"Is that any of your business?" he returned, sneeringly.

"Yes," said Bentley. "I want you to tell me the man's present name, feller. He's not known to me, but I should like to find him. Down around Prince Rupert I believe he was called Blue-Fox Eason."

Harovich shrugged.

"I never heard of that man," he replied, and continued with his cigarette. "I came alone."

"Careful, Harovich," rapped Bentley. At that tone, the cook's eyes widened. There was sheer peril in Bentley's gaze now. "I have said nothing to anybody about that bank robbery over at Valdez three years ago. That is not my concern at all. I know you weren't in on it, nor in what followed it. You simply met the other five men at a certain place with a powerboat. Therefore, I say, you yourself don't concern me. But in the split-up, you and the king-pin of that pack came over this way. And I want that man's present name—*the name he goes by now!*"

THE cigarette, half made, slipped from the fingers of Harovich. Into his dark face came a grayish pallor. He stood swaying, hands outstretched, and for an instant Bentley believed he was about to go for his gun.

Then a mask fell over the swarthy face, and the beady eyes dwelt on Bentley, blazing pinpoints of menace.

"You make a mistake, mister," he replied, steadily. "I no savvy what you talk about."

"All right," said Bentley, shortly. "Get your duffle packed and clear out. There are men at work up the fox-runs?"

"All but Judd. He hurt his foot yesterday," and Harovich indicated the man at the feed-shed, who was now approaching at a limp. He was a heavy-bodied colorless-eyed fellow with a hard-featured face and a crooked twirl to his lips.

"Say, what's goin' on?" he demanded, loudly.

"You are," said Bentley, with a thin smile. "The outfit's changed bosses, though; not ownership. You and Harovich can be off out of the way before the other men come down from the canyons. Carmody, you might save a lot of trouble by confirming them orders."

"All right," said Carmody, sullenly. "Pack your gear into town. I'll not be in jail more'n ten minutes, and after Alf's funeral we'll get together."

Judd and Harovich departed toward the bunkhouse with no more words. Bentley looked after the cook, lips tight, eyes stony hard. He knew nothing about the man of whom he was in search, other than the name of Blue-Fox Eason. It would be disastrous to have Harovich prove too cunning for him. Also, Harovich would now be certain to get warning to the man, unless the latter were, as

Bentley hoped, among those working here on the fox-lay.

"Bentley," growled Carmody, now relieved of the order to silence. "I warn you and Ralph not to lay a finger on my stuff here. You can't jump in and grab private gear."

"Don't want your danged private stuff," said Bentley, promptly. "Anyhow, we ain't playing the kind of game you were. We'll have that accounting soon as you come back to go over the books, if you have any. Don't worry."

"I ain't worried," retorted Carmody. "You will be, fast enough. Didn't have any luck with Harovich about your cursed Blue-Fox Eason, huh?"

Bentley gazed intently at him. "You know that fellow?"

"No," shot out Carmody. "And if I did, I sure wouldn't say anything to you about it."

Bentley turned away. Judd and Harovich were getting ready to leave, with their gear piled on a creaking sledge. Then Judd came on with the outfit close to Carmody and the sheriff. Harovich again passed into the kitchen.

"Sheriff," said Bentley, "think you'll get him to town all right? Them two jaspers going along might take a notion to crack down on you and turn him loose."

Lawson's lips drew into a scowl. "Let 'em try that," he grunted. "They'll mush ahead of me, if I know anything about it."

BENTLEY, standing with his back to the kitchen door, caught a sharp click. It was the sound of a gun-hammer going clear back. Slight as it was, tenuous as was any warning in it, Bentley did not hesitate. His knees buckled under him, and he let himself fall straight downward, limp and prostrate, hand jerking to gun as he fell.

A forty-five roared in the doorway. Harovich stood there, a gun in his dark hand jetting flame. But Bentley's abrupt drop had saved him, for the bullet tore through the fur of his cap as he went down, and whipped it off. Even as he hit the snow, a reddish flash spurted from his side, his gun roared out and Harovich lurched back staggering with a harsh snarl and then plunged headlong onto the snow.

Bentley got up, put away his gun. Lawson came plunging toward him, while Ralph Galt, his own gun out, was watching the startled, glittering-eyed Judd.

"Jeevers, that was a quick move," mumbled Lawson. "Didn't he crack you?"

"No, but I think I stopped him for a while," gruntled Bentley.

"Yep, you sure did." Lawson went and bent over Harovich, then straightened up. "Well, if I hadn't seen it, I wouldn't believe it. We'll load him on with Carmody and bury him with Molker."

Bentley gazed at the dead man, his eyes hard and grim. His mood was savage, black, now. Through Harovich alone he might have reached the man he had sought so long, the man almost unknown to him.

"That's twice I've had to spoil things with a six-gun," he thought to himself. "Back there with the sheriff, who was hand in glove with the crooks and might of spilled a lot if I'd had a chance to handle him. And now Harovich. It's a cinch he was in with whatever gang has been working here, too."

Lawson began dragging Harovich to the sledge with the objecting Carmody. A sudden idea struck Bentley at sight of the bundle of gear on Judd's sledge.

"Say, Lawson," he drawled, "this here Harovich might have known something about the mail robberies up in the ranges. S'pose you take a good look through his gear there on that sledge."

"That ain't a bad notion," agreed Lawson, and waved his hand. "Hey, Judd, come along and give me a hand with Harovich here."

Judd came up sullenly and helped the sheriff lash Harovich to the battens of Carmody's sledge, after the man's pockets had been looked through. From these, and from his bundle of gear, Lawson produced a handful of gold eagles, and a packet of crisp new hundred-dollar bills.

"Jeevers—that—that's some of it!" gasped Lawson. "That's the money the fur-buyers was havin' sent in for their spring tradin'."

"Check up with the marshal's office at Unga," advised Bentley. "The numbers of the missing bills will be known. Looks to me, Lawson, like you'd took in a real nice jackpot your first day in office. You

play your cards right, and if you ain't settin' pretty by tomorrow I'm a Siwash."

Lawson nodded. "And I ain't forgettin' how come it's happened, Bentley," he said. "You've handled things right for me, and when you need a favor, come a-runnin'. You've sure steered me onto something big."

"All right, forget it and play your fiddle," said Bentley. "And don't let Carmody talk you out of it before you get to Herendeen. So long, and good luck."

Carmody had been dumbfounded by Harovich's wealth. His amazement was too genuine to give Bentley any doubt. The latter watched him as he was dragged away on the sledge with the body of Harovich, Judd mushing glumly in the lead and Sheriff Lawson in the rear.

Ralph Galt, watching also, whistled under his breath.

"Don't it beat all?" he gasped, turning a wondering face to Bentley. "To think of that cook being one of the bandits. Well, it goes to prove what I said. He seen everybody pulling so much rough stuff and getting away with it that him and a few more got to running crooked."

"Who?" demanded Bentley. "You know this outfit. Who's his partner?"

"Search me," said Ralph, promptly. "I don't know anything about this crowd. Look here, we got some work to do before Sis gets here tonight. She'd have heart failure to see the place lookin' the way it does."

"And we'll have a little more work on our hands when the men straggle in from the runs about noon to wash up and get to town for Molker's funeral," declared Bentley. "Let's unharness the dogs and get busy."

VII

BENTLEY went to the long bunkhouse and there made a thorough search through everything in and out of sight, but it was fruitless. If any of the men on this fox-lay were in with Harovich on the robbing of the registered mail, their loot was well concealed. Bentley rather believed, however, that Harovich had been the only one on the place to be connected with the bandits. The others must be sought elsewhere. Perhaps the thieves were scattered over several fox-lays in the region. And one of those men Bentley wanted. He did not even know which one, for Blue-Fox Eason had changed his name.

Rejoining Ralph, he went over the house, which was a large one. It was disordered enough. Carmody had subordinated everything to work in the fox-runs, and kept the house as a sort of combined warehouse and living place.

"Sis won't get here before dark, unless she's mighty impatient," said Ralph. "I sent out an old squarehead from Herendeen with a couple of horses and a big sledge, to bring her and the stuff from the house up there. Time she gets it loaded and rides here with it—"

"Not her," cut in Bentley. "Bet you ten bucks she mushes behind huskies and gets here ahead of the main outfit, partner. Pitch in."

Pitch in they did, although each of them was impatient enough to do other things: Ralph Galt to go through the room Carmody had used as an office, and find out how the fox-lay accounts stood; Bentley to go through the entire lay for a general looking over. The sleeping-rooms, three of which were used as store-rooms, had to be emptied out, and noon was at hand before the two men had made a dent in the looks of the place.

"How many fellows did Carmody have here?" inquired Bentley, glancing from a window and starting for the back door.

"Four besides Alf Molker and Harovich," returned Ralph. "Why?"

"One's gone to town with Lawson. That leaves three," said Bentley, hastily. "And here's two coming together. Come along and have your gun handy."

BENTLEY made his way to the kitchen door. The kitchen was a large one, and was used by Carmody's outfit as a messroom. The two incoming men trooped over toward it, shouting for Harovich. They came to a halt as Bentley lounged into the doorway, facing them, and with careless pose began to roll a cigarette.

"Hullo, boys," he greeted them cheerfully. "Lookin' for somebody?"

"Yeah, the boss," returned one. Bentley observed that both were probably considered by Carmody as his hardest men. They were shaggy enough in appearance to crack anything.

"Speaking," said Bentley. "Jim Bentley, partner in this layout, and the new boss."

Ralph Galt came into sight, and the two recognized him with astonishment..

"I've taken the lay back," he explained, curtly.

"Where's Carmody?" demanded one of the fox-men.

"In jail," said Bentley, and lit his cigarette. "Sent him there this morning. He says for you boys to pack your gear and come along and camp in town after the funeral. He might have some idea of throwing me and Ralph out of here. So it's your move."

"Huh?" grunted the spokesman, shoving forward hostilely. "Think so, do yuh? Where's Harovich?"

"Gettin' measured," said Bentley, calmly.

"Measured?" The fox-man scowled. "You tryin' to git funny?"

"Nope," Bentley chuckled. "Harovich had about the same notion you have, feller. There's his gun lyin' on the snow yonder. Judd packed him into town, and I guess they're measuring him right now for a wooden suit to keep Molker company."

"By godfrey!" exclaimed the other, gazing at the gun on the snow. "That's sure Harovich's gun. Say, what all's been goin' on?"

"Quite a bit," said Bentley, eying them. "You'll have to go to town for your chow, boys. We been too busy to cook anything." His voice changed suddenly. "And I advise you gents to get going. If you got any biggety notions, just go right after them guns you're wearing in your dirty belts. Do one thing or the other, gents, and do it in a hurry!"

The two paused, glanced again at that six-gun on the snow and a smear of crimson where Harovich had fallen. The two knew Harovich well; Bentley was an unknown quantity. Their hesitation unnerved them. They exchanged a look, a low word, then turned in unison and departed to the bunkhouse.

Five minutes later they were on their way off the lay.

"Another man due," said Ralph Galt. "That'll be Tinpan Smith. He ain't a bad feller, neither. Good hand, and Mary likes him."

"Hint accepted," said Bentley briskly, pointing to a figure emerging from the lower end of a high-fenced corral. "I expect that's him now."

TINPAN SMITH it was. He came directly to the kitchen door, seeing the two there, and nodded cordially to Galt. He was a wrinkled bald little man of perhaps fifty, with long walrus-like black mustaches, and bright laughing eyes.

"Howdy," he said. "Where's everybody?"

"All of us here," returned Bentley. "New partner and boss. Ralph's sister comin' this evening. Late squatter gone to jail. Cook dead. Outfit chucked out. There's the layout, feller. You're the only one sort o' lost an' strayed. I heard there's a regular job waiting right here if you stay with the lay."

Tinpan Smith took a minute or two to digest this, his shrewd, sparkling eyes appraising Bentley carefully, sweeping to Ralph, then casting about and catching sight of Harovich's gun lying there on the snow.

"So that's it, huh?" he commented, and ejected a stream of tobacco juice. He wiped his lips with a leathery hand. "Allus thought somebody faster'n that rotten cook would come along some day. Old partner looks good; old partner's sister listens good; new partner looks like he was out o' didies and kind o' salty. Suits me. When do we eat?"

"Soon's we rustle up some grub," and Bentley grinned. "Come in an' take a hand."

When the interior of the house had been placed in at least fair condition, Ralph continued with this, while Bentley and Smith went to work at the tin cans and rubbish outside.

The more Bentley saw of wizened old Tinpan Smith, the better he liked the man. Smith had been with Carmody a few months, had no love for his former employer, but proclaimed him an efficient fox-raiser.

"Got nothin' special to say against him," he stated. "Rough feller. That's natural. He did pull this place up an' set her on her feet, even if he did make th' lay look like th' back yard of a fish cannery. Ralph and Mary comin' back suits me. She's a peach, that there girl. Her an' me is good friends. If I was thirty years younger, by godfrey, I'd give all you fellers a run fer your money."

Bentley smiled. Then suddenly he grew somber and moody. "Say, I'm lookin' for a feller," he said. "All I know of him is that he used to go by the name of Blue-Fox Eason, and that he was a close buddy of Harovich's. Got any idea who he could be?"

"Nope," said Tinpan Smith, promptly.

"Who was Harovich's partner when he came here?"

"Didn't have none," said Tinpan. "He teamed around with most anybody, seemed like. Use t' hang around with Judd some."

"Judd, eh? The gunman Carmody had here?"

"Yep. Come to think of it, I don't think Judd's been in this region so awful long. An' nobody knows much about him. I'm sure he didn't come in with Harovich, though, and I don't think they was extra friendly. What's our program with them jaspers of McLeeson's? Fight 'em as usual?"

"Not if we can help it," said Bentley. "We got no quarrel with 'em."

Tinpan Smith grinned as though he had his own notions about this.

WITH three men hard at work, a comparatively short time saw a vast difference in the looks of the place. Mr. Ralph Galt had changed for the better, under the influence of finding himself once more in possession of his fox-lay. Also the hard work he had been doing seemed to have sweated out much of his surly enmity toward all the world, and he had become almost cheerful. The men got the foreground cleared up and had knocked off for a smoke when Tinpan jerked his thumb down the trail.

"Feller comin'," he observed.

The others looked and saw a man driving rapidly toward the house.

"McLeeson," stated Ralph. "The danged fool always mushes his dogs like he thought he was leadin' a blizzard. Ruins huskies fast as he can raise 'em."

He grunted contemptuously.

From his encounter on the previous afternoon, Bentley recalled McLeeson as a heavy-jawed, hard-eyed man who seemed abundantly able to carve out his own fortune. A question to Tinpan Smith elicited that McLeeson had inherited his big fox-lay and had made good with it. Also that McLeeson was a good poker player, a hard drinker, and an altogether up-and-coming sort of man if he did not stop lead before he came.

"Funny McLeeson ain't in town, him bein' th' dead sheriff's cousin. Ought to be at th' funeral," said Tinpan.

"Prob'ly come out to get in touch with me," and Ralph Galt chuckled. "Heard the news and had a drink and mushed hell-bent out here."

"More likely, to find me," remarked Bentley. Tinpan Smith gave him a look of inquiry, but he only shrugged. He had no definite reason for those words. He just had a hunch. Yet it was right enough.

VIII

McLEESON snubbed his sledge and came to the open door where the others stood watching him. He flung a curt greeting at Ralph and Tinpan Smith, but his gaze was fastened on Bentley.

"Hello, feller. So you're th' new partner here. Had Carmody arrested an' threw out his men, eh? Yeah, I seen you yesterday up at the pass, all right. Want to have a word with you."

"Shoot ahead," drawled Bentley. "I got no secrets. Come in an' set a while."

"Like hell I will," snapped McLeeson. "As for havin' secrets, maybe you'll change your mind about that 'fore I get done talkin.' Mary here, Ralph?"

"Not yet," said Ralph. "On the way, I guess."

McLeeson nodded, and looked again at Bentley.

"Come on out, and you an' me go for a walk," he grunted. "I'll leave my gun on my sledge so you don't need to be scared I aim to plug you. You an' me got to have a word together."

"All right," rejoined Bentley. "An' you can keep your guns where you got 'em. We'll get along."

Tinpan Smith caught Bentley's eyes, leaned over behind the door so that McLeeson could not see his gesture, and drew his hand across his own scrawny throat, in a significant manner. Bentley caught the warning and smiled. He had seen McLeeson's gun-belt. As for any danger from a knife, he laughed at the idea. Yet the warning was well heeded.

Leaving the house, he walked with McLeeson a little way toward the bunkhouse, until the man halted, well beyond earshot of the house.

"Now then," he growled, eying Bentley aggressively, challengingly, "out with it! Let's hear where you stand!"

"Huh?" Bentley frowned. "I don't get you, McLeeson."

"Nor me you. You aimin' to fight Carmody?"

"Search me," Bentley answered curtly. "Depends on him."

"Then you'll sure fight. He'll come over here and run you clean out. Want me to lend you a hand?"

"What?" Bentley was openly astonished at this query. "Why should you?"

"Because I want that small fox-lay of Carmody's, the one he originally started with over here a ways. It's no use to you, but would do me a lot of good 'count of the sulphur water and all. Him and me had a meeting last week, signed up the papers and the commissioner's got 'em in escrow, see? We quit our private war. I bought his old lay off him, and he threw in the piece of this lay I grabbed and which we been fightin' over so long. He's to give me possession of the whole thing on the first of the month."

"I don't know of that," said Bentley.

"Nobody else does neither," said McLeeson. "It was a private deal. And now you've sure played hell with it."

"HOW come?" Bentley was momentarily puzzled by the man's attitude. There was something in all this he could not comprehend.

"Well," said McLeeson, "the sheriff and Alf Molker killed each other—lookin' like the war was still goin' on. Now you jump in, rush Carmody off his feet, throw him out of here. What's he goin' to do? Go back to his little old lay, that's what, and throw over his agreement with me. Nothin' else he can do, except get out, an' you can gamble he ain't a-doin' that. Now, I need that there piece of this lay I bought. Carmody couldn't give me title to it nohow, but you folks can. So far as his place goes, I can throw him out of there and keep it. But I thought I'd see you, before Carmody comes runnin' to me, proposin' that him and me throw you out of here and split the difference."

Bentley began to see light. McLeeson was shrewdly playing his own hand regardless, and was playing it craftily. Carmody's original fox-farm was practically McLeeson's now, though McLeeson might still have to fight for it. But he also wanted the canyon of the Galts he had seized illegally.

"Hm!" said Bentley. "You want us to turn over our ground rights in that gulch and sulphur spring, eh?"

McLeeson spat.

"You bet. And you'd better do it. You don't need it."

From one viewpoint, this was true; it was the cheapest way out of sure trouble. Carmody, his force already crippled, would hunt about for allies. He would certainly try to get McLeeson to combine with him, oust the Galts and Bentley, and regain possession, such being nine points of the law. The matter of actual ownership did not much trouble Carmody. The region was too isolated, too primitive in its rule of might makes right, for him to worry on that score. He had just been surprised, caught napping.

"Your advice is pretty good, McLeeson," said Bentley. "How much you expect to pay for that canyon?"

"What? Pay?" McLeeson looked his indignation.

McLeeson sneered.

"Don't be a fool. I got the canyon now, ain't I? I want a deed to it. I'll pay by helpin' you against Carmody."

"I don't think we need help so bad as all that, for a fact," observed Bentley. "When I got to start givin' away half th' place, so's we can keep the other half—say, how do you get that way?"

"LISTEN here, you," said McLeeson, tapping Bentley heavily on the arm. "Just waive them objections and persuade the Galts to make out that deed, see? You better had, and I'll tell you why. Me, I'm no fool, and I looked things over pretty good up in that pass yesterday. The sheriff, he never shot Molker. Molker was killed by a .30-.30 bullet. The sheriff was killed by a six-gun shoved up against him close enough to burn him. And Molker was thirty feet away. Now I don't know who killed Molker and I don't give a darn. That's Carmody's lookout. But puttin' one thing with another, I could come pretty close to sayin' who shot the sheriff. I guess you get the drift?"

"McLeeson, you sure have got your nerve."

McLeeson met his gaze steadily.

"You're square enough. I seen that first thing," he rejoined. "You may be a killer, but you ain't a coward. Now, far's I'm concerned, I'm willing to pass up the whole thing if you'll fix up that deed."

Bentley reflected. He could size up this man pretty well, and the situation was not pleasant. McLeeson was entirely and absolutely selfish, willing to advantage himself in any way possible, and he was ready to start a fight in any quarter that offered the best takings. In a way, he was straight enough, but he was rough shod. And he was certainly strong.

"I'll tell you what happened yesterday," said Bentley, quietly. "I came along and found Molker dead. The sheriff showed up, pretended I'd killed Molker, and wouldn't listen to reason—wouldn't even look to see that my gun had not been used. He had his gun on me, and when I tried to push it away from me, he cracked down, and I had to shoot, that's all."

McLeeson nodded.

"I believe it," he responded. "After hearing how you got Harovich, I'd believe anything of you. Well, do we hitch or not?"

"I can't give you any answer now, McLeeson," said Bentley quietly. "I got an interest in the place, that's all. When it comes to deeds, I got to talk things over with my partners. You can see that for yourself."

"Sure." McLeeson shot a glance at the house. "Far as Ralph's concerned, I'll bend a gun over his head and persuade him fast enough. But Mary's another matter."

"S'pose we leave it stand like this," said Bentley. "I'll talk about it with 'em tonight. Tomorrow I'll get over to your place and let you know. It'll be yes or no. Suit you?"

"Fair enough." McLeeson eyed him. "But if it's no, ain't you scared we'll jump you?"

"Try it," said Bentley, coolly, and both men smiled.

IX

WAVING his hand to the two men in the doorway, McLeeson got onto his sledge, swung around and mushed off swiftly. Bentley went inside.

"Blackmail," he said curtly to Galt and Smith. "McLeeson had it figured that I killed the sheriff up in the pass yesterday and he wants us to deed him that canyon he's grabbed. Otherwise he'll throw in with Carmody against us."

"What?" Tinpan Smith surveyed his new boss. "And did you get the sheriff or not?"

Bentley nodded and calmly sat down. Ralph Galt exploded in an oath.

"Deed McLeeson nothing! I'll see that jigger in hell first. Well, goin' back to work?"

Work was resumed.

Mary Galt did exactly what Bentley predicted she would. She got the horse-sledge loaded, then got onto a sledge behind five huskies and went ahead. She did not get to the place before it was in fair shape, for she passed through Herendeen and as everyone thought she was there for the funeral ceremonies, she felt obliged to attend them out of pure womanly decency. What she heard, however, sent her on out to the fox-lay in a hurry.

"Is all this true?" she exclaimed, entering the house where the three men gathered to welcome her.

"Yep, all true. We're here, and so are you," chuckled Bentley. "Welcome home, ma'am, and we sure hope you'll like it."

"Stop fooling," she snapped. "Is it true about you having a gunfight with Harovich and arresting Carmody and—"

"Oh, now," said Bentley soothingly, "I guess you've picked up a lot of talk somewheres, ma'am. Harovich was one of those mail-sledge bandits and he got killed. I had a tussle with Carmody, sure, but he wasn't hurt much and he's in jail or maybe bailed out by now. Just you forget all your troubles and look at what we've done here, and let bygones be bygones."

"I must say you take it calmly," she exclaimed, gazing at him.

"Why not?" put in Tinpan Smith. "And howdy, ma'am. I'm right glad to be working for you again, let me tell you. Come on through—this here place is yours. I'll take care of the huskies."

He bustled out to the dogs.

Mary Galt was not to be put off by fair words, however. Not until she had heard everything that had happened, would she so much as take a survey of the house; and then she rendered a verdict that was flattering if dubious.

"Well, we seem to be here. For a while anyhow. And you've done wonders, Ralph, and you, Jim. I suppose the place is dreadfully changed since we left."

SHE found it changed indeed, but had no time to mourn, because the larger sledge arrived with their household belongings before many minutes. The only room left untouched by the house-cleaners was the former parlor, now used as an office by Carmody. It held a desk, a locked safe in one corner, and was strewn with papers and letters of the late occupant.

"Here's our job tonight," remarked Bentley, as they looked into this room. "Tinpan, if you got nothing more urgent to do, s'pose you mush in to Herendeen and see what Carmody's up to, if he gets out of jail. He's got some men there who'll make trouble if they can."

"Yeah," said Tinpan Smith. "You aimin' to raise blues without no hands? We got a lot of work to do. Feller was due from across the peninsula tomorrow or next day to look 'em over. Buyer. Carmody figured to have about two hundred to sell."

"All right," said Bentley. "Can you hire a couple men?"

"In Herendeen or somewhere beyond," said Tinpan Smith.

"You're foreman of the works. Go to it. Arrange to meet that fur-buyer and we'll do our own selling. And bring out word, or send it, where Carmody is."

Nightfall saw the house in good shape. Mary Galt summoned Jim Bentley and her brother to a supper that was something of a celebration. She was flushed, starry-eyed, happy, and Bentley found it hard to concentrate his attention on the food or anything else than the suddenly exuberant girl across the table. Yet he knew this was no time for light words.

"We got work to do tonight," he said. "Carmody will be loose by tomorrow, I have a notion. I must go see Mr. McLeeson—who has fortunately tipped his hand to me. We caught Carmody napping, and we've got everything of his under our hands: account books, cash and all the rest."

"The safe's locked," growled Ralph.

"We'll let it stay locked," said Bentley, "until Carmody comes and opens it. Now, soon as we get the dishes cleared up, let's settle down in the office and find out just where we stand financially. By all indications, we should have a good thing, if we can hold it. Suit you folks?"

"You bet," said Ralph, and the shining-eyed girl nodded.

"All except your doing the dishes," she said. "That's my job."

"Nix; we all turn in on that right now," said Mr. Bentley.

HALF an hour later they lighted the swinging lamp in the office and settled down to find out whether the lay had come back to its owners better or worse than it had been before.

Ralph Galt went into the matter eagerly, absorbed, intent on the outcome. Bentley sat silently, a moody frown growing on his brow, his gaze abstracted. Gradually he sank into himself, seemed unaware of his surroundings. Mary Galt was busy helping Ralph for a time, then she observed the black gloom of Bentley.

"What's the matter, partner?" she asked gently. "You seem to have something on your mind."

Bentley raised his head quickly and as he smiled at her, he seemed to slip free of his sternness. "I have had," he said, easily, "ever since I first met you. But—"

"Here we are!" broke in Ralph Galt

exultantly, as he yanked a drawer from the desk. "Here's the books; and darned if he ain't carried on the same old set we left here. Look into 'em, Mary. You can tell right quick."

Mary Galt did look, excitedly enough.

Within fifteen minutes it became evident that Mr. Carmody had never intended any eye but his own to see those books; and certainly not a Galt eye. He had kept the records carefully, and it required only a little figuring on the girl's part to discover that the place was in a state of prosperity. Carmody had sold many furs, was in a position to sell many more.

"All of which," commented Bentley, "shows what a man can do with this place if he knows how."

Further checking up was impressive, and as she finished, Mary Galt uttered an exclamation.

"Do you see? Carmody has built up the value of the place a lot, but he has taken out a lot of cash, half of which belongs to us. We can't get the money from him, I guess, but we can hold the lay and call it square."

BENTLEY leaned back in his chair, lighted a cigarette, and chuckled comfortably.

"Partners," he announced, "we play the cards as they lay. Carmody's licked, and he knows it. Now that we got a woman on the place, he ain't likely to try and run us off or kill us. Nor seize the blues and sell them and light out. Nope, he'll be over soon as he gets out and we'll have a peaceful settlement—for the moment."

"You don't know him," said Mary Galt.

"Know him? One look at that gent's enough to know him clear to the ground." Bentley puffed thoughtfully, then continued. "If I'm here tomorrow, he's liable to start gunplay. If you're here, with me and Ralph gone, then he's blocked. So Ralph and I won't be here."

"What?" Ralph looked up. "Mean to say you'll leave her alone?"

Bentley grinned. "Listen, Ralph—this here girl is just as able to take care of herself as you or me, maybe better. Besides which, I figure Tinpan Smith will be back to sit on the doorstep with a gun and keep an eye on life in general. Mary, you're a right good business woman. Make whatever bargain suits you and it'll suit me. I guess Carmody ain't at his best when he's dealin' with a woman, neither."

"It doesn't worry you, though, does it?" asked the girl.

"Not a bit," smiled Bentley. "Depends on the woman, most generally." Then he added with a swift change of mood, as his face hardened, "Of course, there are some wolves who got to be handled different. Some of 'em rate only straight six-shooter talk—"

Mary Galt's gaze searched him. And suddenly rising, she went to him and caught his arm.

"Look here, Jim!" she said swiftly, emotion in her voice. "This trail you're on—must you—"

Steadily Jim Bentley returned her gaze. Then he smiled, and caressed her fingers lightly.

"Seein' we're partners and so forth," he said, looking into her eyes, "maybe I better tell you. But I got to go back a piece. When I was ten my dad was shot by a blue-fox rustler caught in our corrals next to th' house. That skunk got away an' my dad died a year later. That gave me a yen for mushin' the trail after blue-fox snipers. But I had a kid sister an' my mother was sick, and I had to stay and run the layout.

"When I was twenty, we owned the place and had money in the bank. Year after that my sister died, the house burned, and the Valdez bank where we had our money was cleaned out by five bandits. The bank went bust over it and we lost every dime we had. And them five gents that wiped out the bank stopped right by our place that night while I was away. They wanted food and dogs, got gay when my mother fed 'em, and she took down a rifle to hold 'em off. They — shot her — and mushed away—"

MARY caught her breath—a harsh, hurt gasp. Ralph Galt was thunderstruck. Finally, Bentley pulled himself together. He went on dully.

"I sold out, took a string of huskies and gear, and started in to get that bunch. I got one across the Canadian line ten months later. Last year, two paid off to the law. Fourth one I run

into th' hands of a posse at Shuyak, an' they shot him. They wanted him for some thievin' he'd pulled off in that region. I'm still after the fifth, the leader of the pack. And I'll get him before I quit. I'm close on the tail of that wolf, can almost hear his fur rustlin' in the brush. I'm expectin' to run across him tomorrow at McLeeson's place." His eyes were bleak, his voice low, flat, seemingly burned out.

"Oh," breathed Mary Galt, lips parted and face paling as she gazed at him. Bentley squeezed her hand and then released it.

"Well, then, I'm goin' to McLeeson's with you," announced Ralph Galt.

Bentley nodded absently, as though he had counted on that, but said nothing in reply.

Tinpan Smith returned unexpectedly. He had sent word to a couple of good men he knew and was sure they would turn up some time next day. His report about Carmody was more dubious. The sudden deluge of funerals had taken even Herendeen aback; so had the prominence of the new sheriff, whose activities had made him cock of the walk. Carmody, cleared from jail on bail, had done no talking, but had gone home to his own small fox-lay with his three gunmen.

So Tinpan Smith drew his orders to stay close to the house in the morning and keep his guns handy. The wizened fox-man grinned knowingly.

Jim Bentley hardly slept that night. The immediate situation concerning the Galt fox-lay had to be clarified, had to be concluded sharply, unless he wanted to be plunged into a long and savage war. McLeeson and Carmody had to be settled with, once and for all, and without gloves.

And there was the grimmer, more bitter prospect of his meeting the man he knew as Blue-Fox Eason. The presence of Harovich proved that Eason, his partner, was somewhere close at hand. And Eason would certainly try to do for the man who had killed Harovich.

"And then I'll get him," muttered Bentley, softly. "I'll pay him off. After that, I'll settle down here for life and quit chasing killers—if! All depends."

X

BREAKFAST next morning was a rather somber affair. Ralph Galt was growing elated and rejoiceful at the recovery of his fox-lay. But Bentley was grim-faced, unsmiling, while Mary Galt was full of foreboding and tense anxiety.

After they had eaten, Bentley and Galt mushed away. Neither of them spoke until the house vanished below the rise of the white slopes. Then Bentley mushed alongside Ralph.

"What's the quickest way to McLeeson's place, Ralph?"

Galt motioned to the trail. "Half a mile down here another trail branches off. I'll show you."

"No, you go to town," instructed Bentley. "Now, listen. We don't know who all is in that pack of bandits, but whoever they are, they'll have taken warning after hearing about Harovich. The man I'm after is one of them, prob'bly. I figure to prowl around, learn what I can learn, come to an understanding with McLeeson, and then head for town. I got a notion I'll need you soon's I hit in there, see? You get hold of the new sheriff, and leave the liquor alone."

"Huh?" said Ralph, scowling a little. "Liquor don't hurt me none."

"No, but right now we got to keep clear heads."

"All right," assented the other, sullenly. "You don't need to talk like I was a kid."

"Forget it, old man. Be seeing you in town," said Bentley.

Upon this they parted. Bentley had not wanted Ralph with him when he went to call on McLeeson. Ralph was still too surly, too prone to precipitate conflict. Bentley preferred to handle this matter alone and with diplomacy, if he could.

Nevertheless he looked over the rifle on his sledge-battens and the six-gun in his belt; made sure that he was in readiness for anything and everything.

Silent forces were gathering to a head; criminals, bandits and killers, probably hand in glove with the late sheriff. There was bad blood among the fox-men, jealousy and greed, secret but strong on

every hand; and this festering sore had been abruptly irritated. Now it must be cleansed quickly. And it could only be cleansed by an eruption of men's passions, by jail or death.

From the moment he had been recognized by the sheriff up in the pass, he knew that his own existence depended on quick thinking, quick action, and quick shooting. The sheriff was not the only person in the region allied with the outlaws. Carmody was not guilty. Bentley thought McLeeson was innocent of any connection. But some one—

"Harovich's old partner, Eason," thought Bentley, as he swung along the hard, white trail. "There's the man! If I knew who he was, I'd be all set. Harovich used to go over to McLeeson's place to talk with McLeeson and some other jasper, huh? Well, I got to see those men over there, and then I've got the bird I'm after—maybe."

This idea, added to the fact that Blue-Fox Eason would undoubtedly try to get Harovich's killer, made things look better to Bentley. Better in a grim way that promised flaming six-shooters, and a stern and bitter score wiped out.

"If I find him," breathed Bentley, "one or the other of us is goin' to be all through. Or both!" And he mushed on silently.

THE McLeeson outfit was a large one, showing what inheritance added to ability could do for a man on this lonely white frontier.

The buildings lay below a maze of broken gulches fenced off with high steel webs. All of the structures were substantial and well painted, in first-class repair. The main house was off by itself, and toward this Bentley turned his way. The building was wooden, the clapboards white with fresh paint, the windows heavily shuttered for protection from the whistling blizzards of the Bering. The place looked more like a prosperous farm house of Vermont than a fox-raiser's domicile set in this distant wilderness two thousand miles from a city.

Seeing a man come to the front door, Bentley took it for granted that he was McLeeson. As he came nearer, however, he was astonished to recognize Carmody's man, Judd, whom Bentley had driven off the Galt fox-lay the day before.

"You here?" exclaimed Bentley sharply, as he mushed up.

"Yep," scowled Judd. "Got a job as foreman with McLeeson."

"Uh-huh," nodded Bentley. "First you're fighting McLeeson, an' then you're workin' for him, eh?"

"That's my business," retorted Judd. "I ain't stickin' with no dead horse, an' that's what Carmody is now, I guess." He frowned at Bentley.

"Yeah, I see."

"McLeeson said you was comin' here," went on Judd. "But he didn't look for you so quick. He's gone in to town. Come in an' have a drink, an' wait for him."

Bentley nodded, entered. As he did so, he saw another man, a stranger, pushing up behind Judd.

"Meet Five-Ace Sharpeneck," said Judd. "He's a friend of th' boss."

Bentley shook hands with Five-Ace Sharpeneck, accepted a seat and a cigar. He was conscious of a keen and sustained scrutiny and repaid it with interest. Sharpeneck was a spare undersized man with two bright blue eyes that gleamed in a dried-up face devoid of all expression. A perfect poker face it was, framed by unruly hair of deep and lustrous black. The man's bright blue eyes shone like stones.

"You got a fine lay here, all right," said Bentley. "And McLeeson's in Herendeen, eh?"

"Yes. Was you aiming to see him on business?"

"Yep, personal," said Bentley. "I hear the sheriff raised quite a ruction by finding that Harovich was one of the bandits."

Judd sneered. Sharpeneck flung away his cigarette with a soft chuckle.

"This here new sheriff," the gambler observed, "was maybe a little hasty. I don't know the straight of it all yet, but he's not much as a sheriff. He ain't a friend of yours, is he, Bentley?"

Bentley smiled a little. "Never met him before yesterday, so don't worry none. You can't offend me especially one way or the other about him."

"Thought so," said Sharpeneck. "You

planning to square things up with McLeeson about that canyon?"

Bentley looked at the speaker. His own lean face became equally expressionless, his eyes cold and hard. Sharpeneck sat quite motionless, a thing that few men can do. It showed there was something to this man.

"That's something for me and McLeeson to settle," returned Bentley quietly. "Guess I'll mush on toward town and meet him." He glanced at Judd and queried, "Got any word to send him?"

Judd shook his head and Bentley arose. He stepped out to his sledge, trailed out his dogs and headed for town. Bentley had seen no one around the McLeeson's lay that it seemed could be Blue-Fox Eason.

"Looks like I'm drawin' a lot of blanks sure enough," said Bentley to himself, bitterly. "The whole country knows by now I got Harovich, but nobody makes a funny move around here. Not a man even bats an eye."

HE mushed on, his thoughts black. "Something's wrong, though, about them two jaspers sittin' in there. Can't figure it out. Question is, has McLeeson laid some trap? Looks like there might be more in this than I know. And I better get to town. Bad business, come to think of it, with Ralph Galt and McLeeson both there. Makin's of trouble."

As he mushed into Herendeen, Bentley observed several dog-teams snubbed before the five saloons of the place, and but few elsewhere. He was intent on finding Ralph Galt and getting him away from a possible clash with McLeeson.

He drove his outfit up toward the Silver-Tip, the largest saloon in town. Nearing the place, he heard distinctly a harsh cry from within—

"Deed you nothing, you coyote! Throw in with Carmody an' be damned—"

There was a crashing roar of gun shots.

As Bentley sprang for the door of the saloon, it flew open before him, and Ralph Galt pitched out backward, his body arched in a bow, left arm outflung. His face was agonized, enraged, his gun was still upheld, blazing.

From within the gloom of the saloon came answering blasts of red jetting gun-flame. McLeeson was there, weaving, sagging against the bar. Slowly his weapon slipped from his hand and he began to fall. Galt, clear out on the snow, was still firing at the other fox-man, five shots in all. Then he, too, crumpled suddenly and pitched forward before the Silver-Tip with a harsh groan, his face plunged in the snow. A crimson welter stained the muddy white under his breast. Acrid smoke hazed the interior of the barroom where only a protruding head or two showed that men had taken refuge a moment previously along the walls.

Now the place came alive, as men rushed out. Bentley plunged forward to Ralph Galt and bent over him. The man was dead.

Sourdoughs came plunging toward him from up and down the street to see the cause of the sudden shooting. In the lead was Lawson, who took charge.

"I didn't know Galt was in town," he panted. "Man came and told me—half a minnit too late. They was havin' it hot an' heavy about that canyon an' sulphur spring deal."

"McLeeson's dead in there," said a sourdough. "Both of 'em wiped out."

"My gosh," gasped Lawson. "Each one got th' other, huh? Now there's hell to pay."

"There is—for me," assented Bentley, gloomily. "I got to tell his sister."

Lawson eyed him strangely. "If you'll wait a minnit, I got something to say to you, Jim," said the sheriff.

LAWSON turned to instruct the gathering throng of sourdoughs to take away the bodies of McLeeson and Ralph Galt. Bentley aided the others, his own face somber as the body of Ralph Galt was placed on a sledge and drawn away by hand toward the commissioner's shack.

"More dynamite an' drillin' to make a place for them two," said the sheriff, grimly, and then he drew Bentley aside. "Say, Jim," he went on hurriedly, "I like you, an' I owe you a lot, but there's more dirt to pay than you know, maybe. Know Five-Ace Sharpeneck, the gunfighter?"

"Met him this morning," said Bentley. "I was out to McLeeson's lay to see him."

Lawson swore softly. "This fellow Sharpeneck is bad med'cine, plumb bad," he declared. "I been prayin' all day you'd git to town quick. This here Five-Ace Sharpeneck was in town last night, see? He come over to my office and had a talk. He says I'll have to give up the sheriff star to Judd, an' I told him to go to hell an' Judd along with him. Sharpeneck, he just laughs soft-like an' goes out. I heard later he was asking a lot of questions about you from everybody around here."

"He's welcome," said Bentley.

"Yeah? You don't know him. Him and McLeeson had a sort of agreement. He'd put some cash into McLeeson's lay, and was a silent partner. Darn near the whole partner. Well, last night I heard they'd quarreled, but nobody knew what about. Now, this here Five-Ace Sharpeneck, lemme tell you—"

"NEVER mind the whisky talk," said Bentley curtly, seeing the sheriff had evidently taken a drop too much that morning in some barroom. "Cut out the drinking if you want to keep that star on you! Forget Sharpeneck. Have you heard anything more about the registered mail loot you found on Harovich?"

"Nope. I sent word by wireless out through the Herendeen Canning Company's station, but no answer's come. Point is, Bentley," went on the sheriff earnestly, "this here Five-Ace Sharpeneck has a lot of friends in this town, for all his bad name, see? Most of Carmody's and McLeeson's men are around, too. Looks queer. I can feel danged well that something's up, but I don't know what. Now that McLeeson's been killed, his men will sure as heck tear loose and try to clean up on somebody. There's queer talk going around, too. I don't know just what, but something about you havin' planted that registered mail money in Harovich's gear."

"Yeah?" Bentley looked the sheriff in the eye, hard and straight. "How far do you back me up?"

"Till hell freezes!" exclaimed the sheriff, but his lowered eyes did not back up the conviction of his words.

"Is Carmody behind whatever monkey business is going on?"

"I don't know, for a fact," said Lawson. "I kind of think he ain't, to tell you the truth."

"Hmm. Who's this Five-Ace Sharpeneck? Where'n the deuce did he come from?"

"Lived around here all his life," said the sheriff. "Oh, he's been away spells, maybe two, three years at a time. Always comes back here, though. Gunman, gambler, that's what he is. He's got a thumb and six fingers in politics over to the eastward, too. That feller is plumb bad."

Bentley nodded and made for his sledge. "All right.. I got a rotten job to do at home, so I guess I'll pull out and go do it. You take care of Ralph and have things got ready for a funeral, huh?"

"Yep," said Lawson, "and, meanwhile, you watch yourself. Wouldn't be surprised if some of these jiggers don't start a play with you when you ain't expectin' it. I seen a bunch of bad-lookin' eggs gathered in a shack here on th' edge of town. Seemed half drunk."

Bentley nodded grimly. "Thanks, Lawson. Nothin'd please me better, right now."

XI

PARTING with the sheriff, Bentley trailed out his dogs and, dark of face, started out of Herendeen. He shrank from telling Mary Galt about her brother, and was thinking more about this unpleasant duty than about Five-Ace Sharpeneck.

Still Sharpeneck puzzled him. If the man was really a terror in this region, why had he taken on a vicious animosity to Bentley? The answer looked obvious. He was allied with the bandits—perhaps had headed the gang. He and Judd might both be in on the game. At this thought Bentley straightened in the sledge, and his eyes glinted.

"By gosh, I bet a dollar that's the an-

swer. Them two jaspers were both in with Harovich, sure as shooting. And if I could get out to McLeeson's ranch and go through their gear, I'd more'n likely turn up more of the loot they haven't got clear of yet."

He was mushing past the last shacks of the town now and a sudden remembrance of Lawson's warning caused him to tense warily on the battens of his sledge. The next instant a startled yell rang out, followed by the crack of a shot. The slug whistled past Bentley's cheek. One swift glance showed a tangle of snarling wolf-dogs at the side of a shack; showed him four or five savage looking parka-clad men plunging out of the place. Bentley, already some ways past the cabin, allowed his dogs to swing on swiftly over the trail.

"Caught 'em by surprise," he grunted. "They hadn't figured I'd leave so quick and I nearly mushed away before they saw me. If they come after me now—" He reached for his gun.

They were coming and no mistake. Yells and the whining of sledge-runners came to his ears in the cold stillness of the Alaskan day. More guns cracked.

Slugs whistled by.

Bentley suddenly hawed his team off the trail into the alders that fringed it, and sprang from his sledge as it capsized. Drawing his rifle to him, he dropped flat behind an alder, poked the weapon up ahead of him. A hail of lead was clipping leaves and twigs from the tree above his head, was slashing the trunks.

GRIMLY Bentley fired, and the gunman on the closest sledge reared, arms outflung, and pitched off onto the snow. The dogs of the other drivers coming behind veered sharply at the tangle ahead, overturned the following sledges, throwing them into confusion and hurling the riders in all directions. Calmly watching them, Bentley arose with his smoking rifle, straightened out his own gear, and mushed off.

"Guess that'll give 'em a lesson," he muttered.

Reloading his rifle, as he drove, he headed out along the trail to get away from Herendeen quickly as possible. He was not bound for home now. His thoughts were all on Five-Ace Sharpeneck and Judd, sitting in McLeeson's house. Why had these men been sent to kill him?

"We'll find out, maybe. Got to have the full story to tell Mary Galt," reflected Bentley and he smiled grimly at the white trail.

That noon, three men were gathered in conclave at McLeeson's fox-lay. Carmody was there, after having visited the Galt lay of which he had been dispossessed. He was not wearing any air of triumph, either. Finding that McLeeson had gone to town, he consented to stay for dinner with Five-Ace Sharpeneck and Judd.

And he made no secret of his morning's work.

"I'm up against it, that's all," he said, as they settled down at the dinner table. "So far as that there Bentley goes, I'll settle with him one of these days. But the danged jasper was slick enough to drag Mary Galt into it. With her on the place, I can't throw in a bunch of gunmen and go to shooting."

"Far as I can see, you ain't got a shadow of right to do it, anyhow," said Five-Ace Sharpeneck. Carmody gave him a dark glance and smiled.

"Well, I'd figured to clean up on a good bunch of foxes," he confessed, frankly. "Can't be done now, though. I ain't carrying no war on women. I don't know as I hadn't ought to be satisfied with what I've already got out of the place, and let it go at that."

"My gosh, you're talking mighty low," sneered Judd. "That jigger Bentley was here this morning, looking for McLeeson. I wouldn't be surprised if the two of them hadn't framed up something. McLeeson's got the same notion you have about carrying a war to women. He was right sweet on Mary Galt, too, at one time. And this here Bentley is a fast one."

FIVE-ACE SHARPENECK grunted and his blue agate eyes swept the faces of the two men before him. "He's a lot faster than you men know or think," he said slowly. "He's the man who was working as special agent over in the Unga region when there was a

war on between the blue-fox raisers and the codfishermen who were spoiling the water with their fish refuse. Three fox-men were hung on his testimony, for killin' a damn' codfisher. Three good men strung up, by gee, for killing a lousy skulkin' fish-snailer that hadn't no right to live nohow!"

His words struck the others like a bombshell.

"What!" cried Carmody, staring at Sharpeneck. "You mean to say he's that jasper? How you know?"

"Seen his picture. Same name, too," said Sharpeneck.

"Then, by jeevers, he don't settle down here!" cried Carmody, and he cursed savagely. "Say! I just thought of something. Mary Galt, she says Ralph was with Bentley. Both of them here or just Bentley?"

"Just Bentley," said Judd. "Why?"

"Then it's a cinch Ralph went to town," said Carmody. "And if McLeeson's there, too, I bet you some fireworks go off. Most of your bunch there, Judd?"

"Yep, all but a man or two," said the foreman. "It don't worry me none if Ralph Galt gets what's comin' to him."

He shrugged.

"Yeah," said Carmody, "but McLeeson—"

"Blast McLeeson!" broke out Sharpeneck, his blue eyes venomous. "He's a fool, I tell you. I've got a large interest in this lay, and me and McLeeson's fallen out. You might as well know it, Carmody."

"Yeah?" said Carmody, surveying him. "Well, McLeeson's square as a die, and you ain't. You needn't get riled up, neither. I've knowed you a long while, Sharpeneck, and—"

"My gosh, can't you two jiggers do better'n go bawlin' each other out?" Judd interposed, anxiously. "Cut it out. If Bentley gets out of town with a whole skin, which same he won't, then—"

"Why won't he?" snapped Carmody.

"Because our outfit has orders to get him," said Sharpeneck, a rasp in his voice. His gaze went to Carmody challengingly. "McLeeson wouldn't hear of it, and I gave 'em the orders myself, so there you are. Like it?"

Carmody nodded. "Suits me," he said. "Needn't think you can make me sore by killin' this guy Bentley. If you don't do it I will, by jingo. I ain't even up with him, by a long shot."

"Well, if you want my guess, here it is." Sharpeneck leaned forward across the table. "Carmody, you know about findin' that there registered mail money in Harovich's roll? You seen it done?"

"Bentley found it," said Carmody. "Leastways, he told the sheriff to look for it."

"Yeah. Well, Bentley and Harovich were partners. I can swear to that. Harovich told me about it a while back."

FIVE-ACE SHARPENECK, whatever the purpose, could lie with the affrontery of a veteran. "The two of them pulled off a lot of jobs up beyond Unga, see? Bentley, he came along here and Harovich saw right away that Bentley had turned against him. Harovich tried to gun him. Well, you know what happened."

"Great Scott!" gasped Carmody, staring. "So that's how come, huh? Prob'ly this Bentley had heard from Harovich all about me having the Galt fox-lay and so forth. He snaked along in and went right to Ralph Galt and bought an interest. He had lots of cash. Then he come along and jumped Harovich, and tries to make a play about Harovich bein' a bandit. No wonder he could play a good game, with all them cards."

"And it was him killed th' sheriff," put in Judd, swiftly. "Remember, Carmody, the sheriff was over to Unga the time of that war between the fox-raisers and the codfishers. Bet you a dollar the sheriff saw Bentley there, and they met up on the trail and the sheriff made some crack about it, so Bentley up and shot him."

"What?" exclaimed Carmody. "But what about Alf Molker, then?"

"Shucks, I guess Ralph Galt shot him. He was killed with a rifle bullet, not a six-gun slug. And the sheriff was downed with a six-gun held close to him. Me and McLeeson figgered all that out."

The blue eyes of Five-Ace Sharpeneck glowed with an unholy light. This was

even better than he had been looking for.

"Let me tell you fellows something." he said earnestly. "This here Bentley ain't nobody's fool. He's so cursed salty he shines with it. I bet you he pulls out of Herendeen alive, for all of our outfit laying for him. I was talking to the sheriff last night, but there's no use trying to drag that fool into it. He's all puffed up over jailing you, Carmody, and finding the mail loot on Harovich. The three of us have got to act."

"Shoot the piece," said Carmody.

The men made cigarettes, and Sharpeneck went on with his program.

"I tell you, we got to get this Bentley — providing he leaves town alive. Now, it's a cinch that if he had money enough to buy in with the Galts, he's got the rest of the loot with him."

"Then you've known quite a while about Harovich bein' in with that pack of bandits?" demanded Carmody, eying Sharpeneck.

"Sure. Harovich said he'd reformed," said Sharpeneck, smoothly. "About Bentley, now — the thing to do is to make that cuss, Lawson, resign and get Judd here appointed sheriff. I'll answer for the commissioner and the rest of the works. First thing we'll fix Bentley. And when we go through his gear, we'll find his share of the loot."

Carmody did not like Five-Ace Sharpeneck. Carmody had his faults, but he was not yellow or entirely crooked.

"I don't know just what you're driving at," he said flatly, "but I aim to get Bentley my own self and do it my own way."

Sharpeneck hesitated, and shot Judd a glance, perhaps of warning.

"Well, that's all right," he said, "but about that sheriff, we've got—"

"Suits me to kick him out, too," said Carmody.

Judd arose and went into another room. Sharpeneck, muttering that he did not like the brand of whisky on the table, went off in search of another. Carmody, left alone, emptied his glass and sat smoking, gazing out of the window. Presently, Sharpeneck returned with another bottle.

"Somebody coming this way," observed Carmody, pointedly.

XII

FIVE-ACE SHARPENECK followed Carmody's glance out of the window, eyed the oncoming sledge and hastily called for Judd.

Carmody rose, after a moment, hitched his gunbelt around. He had recognized the oncoming figure. He poured another drink and downed it at a gulp. Then, with a flush rising on his dark face, he stepped to the door, opened it and went out to meet Bentley.

Swinging up, Bentley saw Carmody awaiting him, impassive, silent. The room behind Carmody looked empty as Bentley approached. Then Judd appeared behind Carmody.

"Bentley," said Carmody, in a rather thick voice, "I'm lookin' for you."

Bentley, hands at his sides, could not mistake the import of the other's words and air.

"Let your lookin' wait for a better time, Carmody," he said quietly. "Prob'ly you don't know that McLeeson and Ralph Galt have just killed each other in town. It's no time for starting any more war, Carmody."

Hearing this, Judd flung a look behind him, but Five-Ace Sharpeneck was not in sight. The news made no impression at all upon Carmody.

"I ain't studying nobody else's business," said Carmody. "I got my own to mind and I don't aim to take what I've took off you lying down."

"In which I don't blame you any," said Bentley, with the vestige of a smile. "But let it wait a while, Carmody. I'll meet you in town tomorrow if you want, but for today I got more important things to do than shootin' at you. And I don't want to kill you now or later, if I can help it."

"This is the day and the time," droned Carmody, as though he had not heard. "Godfrey, have I got to draw and shoot you down like a dog?"

"I guess you do, if you mean it," said Bentley, crisply. Anger lighted his eyes. "Don't be a fool, man," he exclaimed. "There's been too much gunplay around here. It's got to end. There's nothing between us that calls for shooting."

"Well, you started it, so I guess you can finish it now," said Carmody, grimly. "I ain't anxious to be neighbor with no sneakin' detective, neither. That got under your hide, huh?"

BENTLEY flushed and shot a hard look at Judd, close behind. How had Carmody learned this?

"I'm not a detective," he said, curtly.

"You lie!" snarled Carmody, and went for his gun.

Bentley caught the motion, read the deadly murderous intent in the big man's eyes, and in desperation reacted almost involuntarily to save his own life.

Against Bentley, Carmody had not a chance. As the fox-raiser's gun leaped up, Bentley's forty-four crashed out in the cold air. Carmody whirled half around, his gun went off wildly, the bullet tearing into the snow. Then he pitched down onto his face.

Bentley stepped forward, knelt beside him, then gazed up at Judd.

"Come out and look after him," he snapped. "Prob'ly broke his leg; nothing worse, so far as I know. I shot so's not to kill him." Then his gun jerked up. "Hear me? Step out here. Unbuckle your belt as you come. Drop those guns."

"What you mean by this?" snarled Judd, coming outside, fumbling at his belt.

"What I say," retorted Bentley. "Let those guns drop—and grab for 'em if you want to take the chance! Where's Sharpeneck?"

"Don't know," said Judd, sullenly, letting his gunbelt fall. "He rode off about an hour ago. He said he had to go somewhere."

"Probably setting some more jaspers on my trail, huh?" grunted Bentley. "You look after Carmody and do the job right."

He picked up Judd's belt and guns and stepped into the house. As he glanced about the room, he caught sight of something moving in the open crack of an inner door, near the jamb. He faced toward it like a shot—but he had detected the menace of that movement too late.

The reddish flame of a gun leaped out, and Bentley lurched and collapsed onto the floor.

From around the side of the house came the cook of the lay, running.

"What's all the shooting about?" he yelled, then caught sight of Carmody. "Hey, Judd, who killed him?"

"Come here, cook."

FIVE-ACE SHARPENECK, emerging from an inner room, beckoned the cook inside and pointed to the figure of Bentley at his feet.

"This fellow got Carmody, but Carmody got him," he said glibly. "Come in now. Fetch some towels and hot water. Carmody ain't dead. Move!"

The cook vanished on the jump. Five-Ace Sharpeneck leaned over the figure of Bentley for a moment, then rose to join Judd. "He ain't dead. Creased him," he said hastily. "I fixed things; so much the better. Now, we'll stick plenty onto this jasper and finish him. Don't forget; Carmody's bullet struck him, see? Carmody don't know the difference. Here, we'll carry Carmody in."

They lifted the fox-raiser and carried him into the room. His leg was broken just below the knee. At this moment the cook appeared with a kettle of water and some more or less clean rags.

"Look at that jigger on the floor, while we get Carmody bandaged," directed Sharpeneck.

The cook obeyed. He turned Bentley over on his back, and clawed open his shirt, which was already partly loosed.

"My stars!" the startled exclamation broke from him. "Look here, Judd! Is all this real?"

He showed them a flat, thick packet of brand-new hundred-dollar bills that had fallen from inside Bentley's shirt as the cook opened it.

"S'pose you remember just how you found it, cook," said Judd. "This fellow is the one Harovich told us about—one of those bandits. Get a rope. We'll tie him up."

"And do it quick," added Sharpeneck. "Looks as if somebody would be along from town most any time now."

IN this, Sharpeneck was more than right. Bentley came to himself, to find that he was securely lashed to a chair. His wound was of no serious import, though it left his temples throbbing. A groan drew his attention to one side, where

Carmody was being held by the cook and Judd while Sharpeneck deftly set the broken leg. The bullet had passed on through.

"All right," said Sharpeneck, calmly, as Carmody relaxed. "She's set an' he's fainted. So much the better. Got them splints, Judd? Give me a hand with them. Cook, go get the bottle of iodine off the shelf at the foot of my bunk."

Slowly Jim's head was clearing.

Bentley comprehended something of his own position, but did not understand why he was tied in the chair. He watched Sharpeneck and Judd finish their rough surgery, and a very good job they made of it. Carmody did not regain consciousness, for the pain had been terrific.

"All right, Judd," and Sharpeneck stood up. "Guess we can go wash. Well, Bentley's awake. How you feelin', Mr. Bentley? Damn your hide, you'll be feeling worse pretty quick!"

Bentley made no response. In the glittering eyes of Sharpeneck, in that queer poker face, he read a venomous hatred. Judd regarded him with a hard smile, but it did not hold any of the deadliness of those blue eyes.

The two men went into the kitchen to wash, for their hands and wrists were red with blood. Bentley saw that they must have bandaged him before attending to Carmody, since his wound was stanched.

The cook came into the room, paused at the table, then swore.

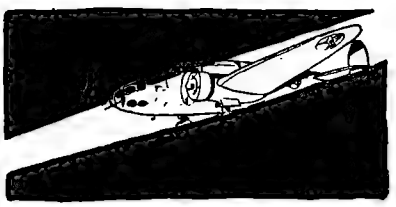
"Heck, this ain't iodine—it's Sharpeneck's hair-dye!"

He swung around, but Bentley's sharp exclamation halted him.

"Hair-dye! Does Sharpeneck dye his hair?"

The cook chuckled. "Does he? Darned if he ain't th' worse redhead you ever seen. Used to be anyhow—when him an' that Meat-Axé Harovich was buddies down Prince Rupert way. Seems like Sharpeneck was shakin' somebody off his trail—dyin' his hair that way, an' all. Prob'ly changed his name along with it. Got to say, you're mighty lucky, mister. You ain't got but a scratch, an' you can go to jail—"

Bentley did not hear what the cook was saying; he had shut his eyes, for the



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realization had come to him with anguish and bitterness.

XIII

SHARPENECK was Blue-Fox Eason! He and Harovich had come into this region separately. And Sharpeneck had dyed his hair and changed his name. And here he had not even risked living on the same fox-lay with his old friend and partner, the Russian killer.

Bentley's face set in hard and bitter lines. He saw a sledge approaching, but it meant nothing to him. He looked at Five-Ace Sharpeneck and Judd as they came into the room; and when they stood smirking at him, he said nothing.

"Pretty good catch, ain't he?" said Sharpeneck. "Feelin' better, Bentley?"

Bentley did not answer. Under his steady gaze Sharpeneck paled a little, then swore softly.

"Somebody's comin'," announced the cook. "Hey, Sharpeneck, want that iodine?"

"Don't matter—forget about it," said Sharpeneck. "Carmody's bandages are on now. That must be some of our men. Judd, better send for the sheriff."

"And remember it was me found the money on this fellow," spoke out the cook proudly. "If there's a reward for him, then—"

"Then it's yours, you bet," said Sharpeneck.

Bentley saw his grin, saw the packet of banknotes on the table, and suddenly comprehended that Sharpeneck had trapped him. Then, for the first time, he spoke.

"You're finished, Blue-Fox Eason," he said, meeting the gaze of Sharpeneck. "You'd better start in sayin' your prayers, for my trail's at an end. You know who I am and what I want you for."

"Yeah, your trail's ended all right," said Sharpeneck, with a sneer. "It's ending in the pen, that's where. Are those our men, Judd?"

"Nope." Judd was eying the approaching group of sourdoughs with a puzzled frown. "Looks like a couple of our men, all right. Say, it's that cursed sheriff. And a couple more men I don't know."

Bentley laughed grimly. "I guess your outfit has lost a good bit today," he said.

The others stood staring, as the string of sourdoughs mushed up to the house. Two of them belonged to the place, two were strangers, and Lawson completed the group. As they came closer, Judd swore.

"Our two men are handcuffed, Sharpeneck!" he exclaimed, startled. "Something's gone wrong."

"We'll fix it," said Sharpeneck, quietly.

THE men on the sleds brought their dogs to a halt. The sheriff came in through the door, followed by the two strangers. The men who belonged on the lay remained on a sledge, evidently secured to it.

"Hullo," said Lawson, shortly. "What's been goin' on here? Carmody hurt? And what you got Bentley lashed there for?"

"For you to arrest," snapped Sharpeneck. "Come on in, have a drink, and fly at it. Who's your friends?"

The sheriff turned to the two strangers. "Two special government agents," he said, proudly. "They heard about me locatin' Harovich as one of that mail-bandit gang and they come ashore from a revenue cutter to see about it."

"Well, we got Harovich's partner right here, and caught him with the goods on him," said Sharpeneck, motioning to Bentley. The latter said nothing. His eyes met and held those of the two government men for a moment but he made no response. The sheriff looked about at the men around him, frowning.

"This feller, Bentley?" he began. "Say, Sharpeneck, you must be wrong here."

"Just a minute—explaining's simple," said Sharpeneck. "What you got my two men handcuffed for?"

"For raisin' hell," said Lawson, promptly. "They tried to shoot up Bentley, and he crippled half of 'em, or all of 'em but these two, and we gathered them in."

The cook hustled in now and brought a bottle and glasses. The two federal men looked at the package of money when the sheriff handed it to them.

"Out of the same lot you showed us at your office, Sheriff," said one curtly.

"Came out of a registered-mail pouch. Bank numbers still on the paper around it. Where'd you get it?"

All looked at Sharpeneck, who turned with a gesture to the cook. The cook spoke up eagerly.

"There's the feller," and he pointed to Bentley. "It fell out of this jasper's shirt when I went to turn him over."

"How about it?" snapped one of the federal men.

BENTLEY said nothing at all. He sat there as though carved in stone, but his gaze remained fixed on Sharpeneck. Now the latter spoke.

"Gentlemen," he said smoothly, "I've known for some time that Harovich had been in that bandit gang. He said he had got nothing out of it, and he had reformed and all, and would I keep quiet. I did it, to give him a chance to go straight. Well, you all know he didn't, I guess. The point is, he said to me one day that this jigger Bentley, had been the head of that pack. Judd heard him."

"Yep," said Judd, with a nod of assent.

"This Bentley came along here today," pursued Sharpeneck. "Carmody was here. Carmody stepped out to meet Bentley and pulled a gun. He shot Bentley, and got shot. Me and Judd were looking at him, and the cook was seeing if Bentley was dead, and give a yell and showed us the money."

The two federal men glanced at each other, then looked silently at Bentley. The sheriff rubbed his nose uneasily, but obviously was helpless to intervene.

"Bentley's played a real smart game," went on Sharpeneck. "He met up with our old sheriff in Brunn's Pass. The sheriff hadn't been killed by Alf Molker at all. We figured out that the sheriff was killed by a six-gun held close to him. Bentley must of killed him. That don't signify, but it goes to show how slick Bentley is. I s'pose you'll deny that, Bentley is."

Everyone glanced at Bentley, who smiled grimly. "Not a bit of it," he said, to the surprise of all. Then he fell silent.

ONE of the federal men cleared his throat and pulled out a pair of handcuffs. He jingled them in his hand.

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"Looks like we'd got our man," he remarked to his companion, and the other nodded. "I guess you have no objection to our taking him along, Sheriff."

"I guess not," said Lawson, none too happily.

A federal man came over to Bentley and motioned to the rope.

"Cut him loose," he snapped at the other. "I'll tend to him when you get his hands loose."

Bentley said nothing. The federal man worked at the rope, and, after a moment, it began to come loose. His companion reached down and caught Bentley's right wrist.

Something astonishing happened—something so astonishing that for an instant none of those who saw it could believe their senses. And that instant was fatal to one of the men who stood staring.

Instead of clapping the handcuffs on Bentley's wrist, the federal agent jerked out an automatic and slipped it into Bentley's hand, then stepped back.

"You men slipped up on one point," he said. "Bentley happens to be the United States marshal in charge of this case. Play your cards, Bentley!"

Bentley chuckled grimly, looked about the group of astounded men as he rose to his feet.

"Up, gents," he said to Judd and Sharpeneck. "You two jiggers are under arrest. Sharpeneck, you're the leader of this bandit bunch. We'll probably find what's left of the registered-mail loot in your hands. You slipped that package of notes into my shirt so they'd be found. Judd, I figure you're hand in glove with him. I'll take both of you."

One of the federal men was already crossing the floor. He seized the uplifted hands of Judd and snapped on the handcuffs. Judd, pop-eyed, was too stupefied to find words. Then the federal agent started toward Sharpeneck, producing another pair of bracelets. For an instant his figure came between Bentley and Sharpeneck.

In this instant Sharpeneck moved. He ducked, a gun leaped into his hand, a shot cracked out. Another shot answered it like an echo. Five-Ace Sharpeneck spun around and collapsed in a heap. Bentley lowered his smoking automatic. There was a red welt on his cheek where Sharpeneck's bullet had passed. A drop of blood gathered, fell to his chin.

"So that's the finish of Blue-Fox Eason," he said slowly. "Sorry, but we'll have to be satisfied with Judd, sheriff."

"By gosh!" Sheriff Lawson came to him hastily, grabbed his hand and pumped it. "By jeevers, Bentley, I'm sure glad. I didn't see no way to help you, and now it's all right."

HE paused as the howling chorus of the many wolf-dogs outside, about the building, heralded the approach of another string of huskies.

Pushing open the door, Jim Bentley blinked in the brilliance of the heatless sunlight that flamed on the snow wastes, as he saw Mary Galt, white of face, wide-eyed, springing from a sledge.

"Jim—oh, Jim!" she cried running toward him over the snow. "I couldn't stand it—knowing you were here—feeling you'd—you've found that man! Did you—"

Jim nodded. His arm was around her waist. "It's ended," he said, slowly.

Then, still holding the girl, he turned to Lawson who had paused in the doorway.

"You might as well let those two fox-men loose," said Bentley. "They were only obeying orders and didn't do much harm. Well, if it's all right with everybody, we'll mush out of here. Got a lot of things to do."

"Sure," said Lawson, eying the girl. "Sure, Jim. We'll see you two in town tomorrow. There's no sky-pilots in this region, but the commissioner can fix you up—" Lawson paused suddenly, and then, as if overwhelmed at his own words, vanished within the house.

And the government men, starting to come out, also backed in again hastily; for Jim Bentley had told Mary Galt of the death of her brother, and now he was striving to comfort her. And if the abashed onlookers didn't quite know what this was all about, they were agreed that Mr. Jim Bentley was, as usual, doing a good job of what he was at.

Mary Galt was saying—nothing.

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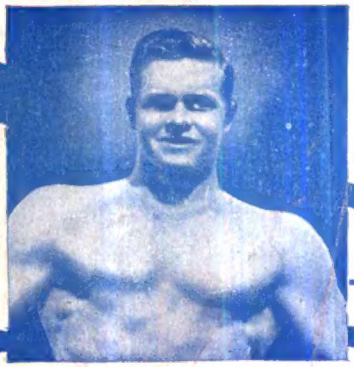

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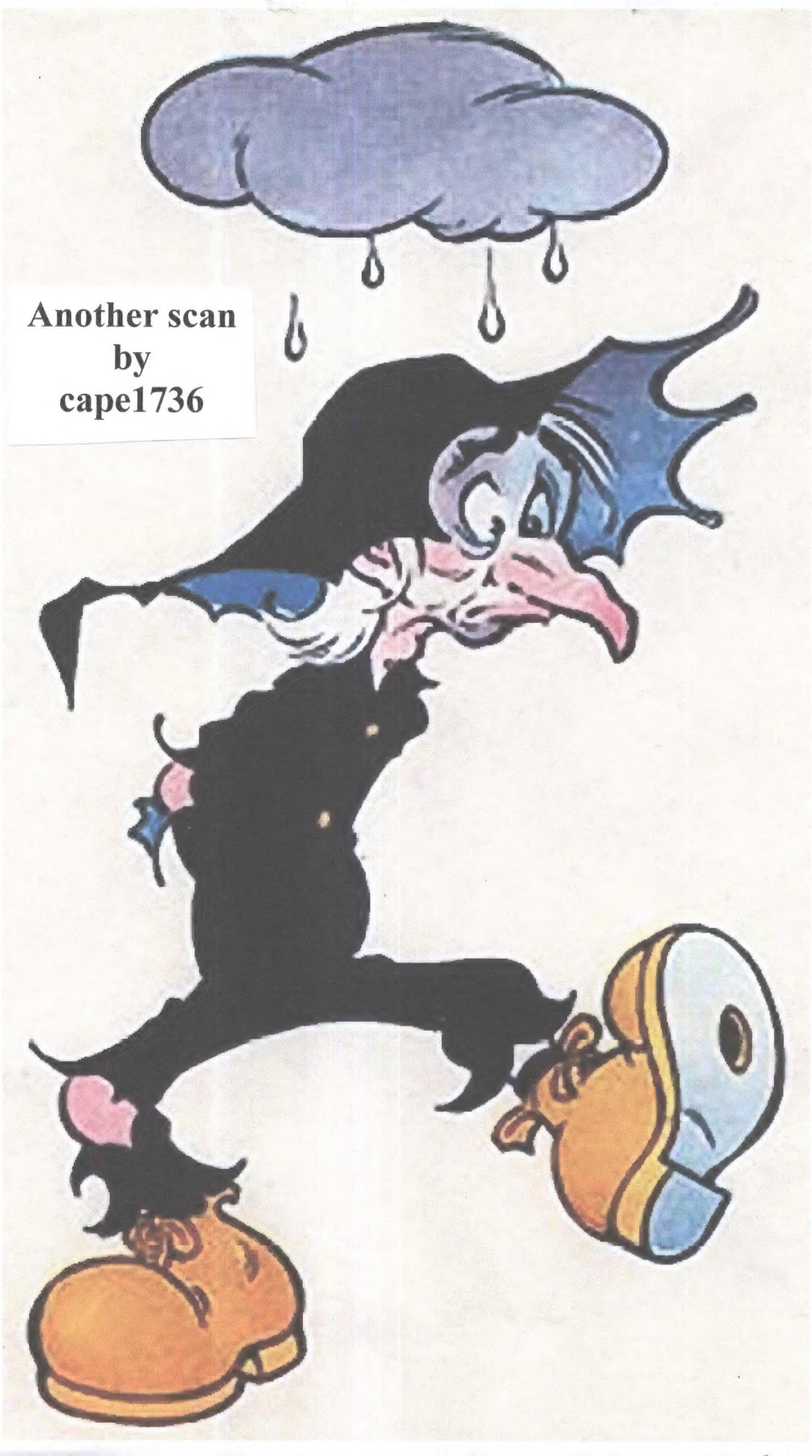
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